The Four Stages of Trauma Recovery, as told by Dr. A Burdett

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The Four Stages of Trauma Recovery, as told by Dr. A Burdett

by Humanities_Handbag

Summary

Tom and Maddie Wachowski were, by far, the most puzzling clients Dr. Alice Burdett ever had. One was a police officer. The other a vet. They were a loving couple living a modest life a few towns over in Green Hills. A town that had recently stopped giving out information to anyone beyond its borders.

And they'd come in to discuss their son.

They didn't give her a name. They didn't tell her what he looked like. Only that he needed help.

Dr. Alice Burdett had been a therapist long enough to identify trauma. And their child was absolutely, totally, and significantly traumatized. And she could work with that.

"Right," she said, clicking her pen, watching the helpless parents over her notebook. "Let's start at the beginning."

(rated T for language)

Notes

For those who guessed, Dr. Alice Burdett is the name of the therapist on the door that Sonic breaks into in the movie.

See the end of the work for more notes

Stage 1: Recognition

Dr. Alice Burdett watched the couple in front of her carefully.

They were a nice-looking couple. The wife (Maddie Wachowski, as she'd introduced herself days before over the phone) sat comfortably enough on her gray, overstuffed couch, one leg crossed over the other.

The husband, Tom, was doing his best to look cool.

The way he was furiously tearing apart a tissue on his lap gave most of that away.

He was looking around her office, staring almost skeptically at everything. She'd tried to tailor her office to be as calming as possible. That was important, when treating patients. The environment.

She had a tiny electric waterfall on her desk.

She also had stones lined up neatly on bookshelves. Quartz, tigers eye, and amethyst tucked around huge volumes of *Psychology Today* and *Your Mind; Power and Truth* . A noise machine sat on the floor, humming out an even static. There was a chaise, a chair, and a gray, overstuffed couch.

Tom Wachowski was busy glaring at everything. Away from the posters on the walls with pictures of the brain and cycles of obsession.

It was normal, she thought, for patients to resent the space.

They didn't want a reason to be there.

They didn't like that there were issues.

They were scared, confused.

They took it out on her tiny waterfall and noise machine.

There were fidget toys on the table between the couch and the chair, and he reached down and scooped one up in his palm, weighing it before twisting it frantically. "So," he said, leaning back against the couch cushions, trying not to give away the twinges of crackling panic in his voice. "Do all therapists offices come pre-packaged or something?"

Maddie pinched him.

From her perch on the chair, Dr. Alice Burdett smiled. "I think you'll find that most therapists enjoy a… neutral environment, Mr. Wachowski."

"Tom is fine."

“Tom, then,” she nodded, not at all perturbed by his nervous mockeries. She turned towards Maddie, smiling her cool grin again. “And Mrs. Wachowski-?”

“Maddie,” said Maddie.

Another smile. “Maddie,” said Dr. Burdett. “Of course.” She picked up a pad from next to her, taking the pen from the top and clicking it open. She knew that already. She'd been willing to take their case anyway, at the beginning. A couple with a new child. But the little information they'd revealed over the phone had piqued her interest.

They were from Green Hills. *Green Hills*. A tiny town fifteen minutes away. It wasn't a special town, in any real sense. She'd driven through before. A classical, small, sweet town under the foothills of the mountains. Full of people who'd been born there, lived there, died there. A small town that protected one another and knew everyone by name.

What was interesting, though, was that a little less than a month ago, the town had gone blackout.

No news.

No updates.

When she'd tried to do research after speaking to the couple on the phone, she'd only gotten information one month back. And what she could find that was recent, felt stilted and hidden.

A little red dot had started to *ping* in her mind. But... she was interested. A couple from Green Hills. Something about it dragged her in close, and she'd given them a slot.

“So. I spoke to my receptionist beforehand, and we already spoke over the phone. But you two aren’t here for couples therapy, right?”

Tom shook his head, twisting the fidgit.

“Though you’ll certainly be able to ventilate some emotions in this space. And I’d encourage you to do so. Therapy is a healthy tool for marriage.” She leaned back, regarding the couple cooly. “And from what you told me about your situation, it’s only natural that there would be strain on a household when you introduce a new member to your family.”

Tom reached out and grabbed Maddie’s hand with his free one. She squeezed back. “That’s… actually why we’re here.”

“Mmm.” The pen clicked again. “The new member of the family?”

“Yes.”

“And how it’s affecting you.”

“Well…” Dr. Burdett watched Maddie swallow and shift. Her crossed legs switched.

Tom shifted beside her, their hips bumping, fumbling with the fidget toy in earnest. “It’s not. Really. Not on our marriage, I mean. No strain there.”

“Then…?”

“It’s more… trying to figure out ways to help *him* .”

“Him being-”

“... our *child* .”

Dr. Burdett’s red light flickered.

Well.

That was interesting.

“Right,” she said. “Your child. Whose name is…?”

Tom sucked on his teeth. “Uh,” he said. “… S-am?”

The red light blinked.

Dr. Burdett hummed. “And I’m guessing that’s not his real name.”

“It’s not,” said Maddie, slowly.

“So… you’re not going to tell me?”

The couple fell silent.

The red light blared.

Very interesting.

A new couple, with a son whose name they weren’t willing to give.

“Your child,” the therapist repeated, flatly. “No name with that?” They shifted nervously under her gaze. She wrote something down. “And has… *your child* been with you for long?”

“Three weeks.”

“Very new, then.” Dr. Burdett wrote something else down. “So you’ve been filing for adoption for a while? And you must have gotten approved recently.”

Tom cleared his throat. He was sweating, and doing a crap job hiding it. “No approval yet.”

She looked up, blinking. She pulled her glasses a fraction off her nose.

RED, RED, RED screamed the light.

“Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski,” she said. Both of them shifted forward, ready to correct her, but she held out her hand. Their mouths snapped shut. “I’d love to be able to help you. I really would. But you do realize that I need *more* information. Right now all I know is that you’ve got a child with no name and no legal status in your family.”

The oddest case.

The *strangest* case.

Maddie jolted forward, hair scraping her shoulders. “And we’re really sorry about that. It’s just that… these circumstances are… incredibly different. And delicate. And very hard to describe. It really just sort of… happened. We’re still trying to figure out things as they come around.”

“So for right now, he’s a foster?”

“Sort of,” said Maddie. Alice watched her jaw tick.

Peculiar situation.

New parents.

A son with no name and little description.

And all of it from a town that had, recently, blacked out most of its information from everywhere beyond its borders.

Peculiar.

No.

Absolutely fucking *off-the-wall* .

Dr. Burdett took a deep breath. “If we’re going to continue these sessions, I’d like at least some information, if that’s fine with you. And updates. It’s important to understand a timeline when going through progressions.”

She would need *anything* to understand.

She could settle for next to nothing, if this odd couple could

“Of course,” said Maddie. Her fingernails were digging into Tom’s hand.

“Right then.” She jotted down one last note, before looking up at them with another one of her soft grins. “I usually like to allow my patients to choose a direction at the beginning. So. Why don’t you tell me where you’d like to begin.”

They looked at one another. And then back at her.

“So…” Tom dragged out the word, “I met… this child… about four weeks ago. And we went on a… road trip. Sort of. A high stakes sort of thing. And he was annoying at first. Really active, hyper sort of kid.”

“How old is he?”

“Twelve.”

“It’s a crazy age.” She’d had a few twelve year old patients, and patients who *had* twelve year olds on their own. Hyper, insane little humans who spoke in memes more than they did the English language.

“He’s a crazy kid,” Tom kept going. “He never stops talking. And he’s *always* moving.”

“Always,” agreed Maddie. “You can’t ask him what his favorite color is without getting a story.” She laughed, face bright, and Tom couldn’t help but fall in line, the two of them grinning. “And we *just* got the floors done, too! He runs *so much* . We keep telling him not to, but the sound of running around the house-” She laughed again.

“We weren’t supposed to keep him. And like I said, we got off to a rough start. But after everything…” It must have been nice, talking about this stuff again for them. Nice being able to remember the reasons they’d gotten themselves into this. “So after it was all over, we just sort of invited him over again and again and again, and now he’s got a room at our place.”

She paused -her pen digging into the paper- to squint up at him. "So if I'm hearing you correctly, he *wasn't* from an orphanage or an affiliating organization?"

Tom wen't quiet. Madde bit down on her cheek.

The red light was *dancing*.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski. You know that my silence is only good when I know no one is in danger-"

"And no one *is*," Tom assured her, quickly. "It's nothing bad, I swear. We didn't - take a kid, or anything like that."

"He came to us," said Maddie. "That's all. He came to *us*."

She looked down at her notebook. Back up at them. The way they were watching her, terrified. Well. It was a risk, certainly, to continue. But then again, they were the strangest case she'd gotten in her office in some time. She could bite.

Alice hummed. "So," she said. "Tell me what else is happening with you *son*."

And they did. That their son loved the family dog. That he was excited to finally have movie nights. That he was always happy to get outside. That he was shy, and nervous around kids in the neighborhood.

“He’s Just started school. It’ll be good for him to get some friends.”

Dr. Burdett nodded along with their stories. She laughed at the right moments and hummed at others. They told her about family movie nights. About how their new, nameless child has modeled himself after Keanu Reeves. How they're psyched to show him Bill and Ted. About his favorite foods. His favorite spots in their mysterious town.

And when the two of them took a break to breathe, she wrote down another quick comment and looked up, leaning on her elbow. "Well," she said. "This sounds like a great situation."

"It is," said Tom. "The best."

"We're so glad he's with us. We don't know what we'd do…"

"Then, if you don't mind me asking," Dr. Burdett mused, leaning back, "if everything is so idyllic, why are you here today?"

And just like that, the light faded.

Tom could practically see it melt away down the walls. Beside him, Maddie's joy hardened.

"Ah," said Dr. Burdett. "So then *not* all idyllic."

"No." Tom looked at his shoes. The fidget in his hand felt too heavy. "Not all idyllic."

Maddie shifted. Tom watched her eyes search the room for another spot, blinking away a wetness that she wasn't ready to show. "It's been a really hard change for him. And for a while, we sort of thought that it *was* the change that was the hardest…"

"But?"

"But…" Maddie swallowed, and bit down on her lip. The sound that pressed through her teeth was painful.

Tom squeezed her elbow. "But then there were a few incidents."

Incidents.

Code: two parents who realized that their child had a history.

It was a common thing for adopted children to have some questions about themselves. And with that, came emotional, social, and behavioral issues. Sometimes, there was neglect. Abuse. Sometimes it was subtler. A search for identity. Other times, a search for place.

Whatever it was, it was always a far stretch from the lifetime movie parents saw on television.

Dr. Burdett slid her glasses off her nose, pressing the end against her lips. The edge there was well worn, like it had been chewed often in thought. "Care to give some details?"

Maddie leaned against Tom.

Tom wound his arm around her shoulder.

“So,” he started, “it pretty much started a few days after he arrived. It’s… small, sometimes. Just- he can retreat, you know? He’ll stop talking. Sometimes he stays in his room for a long time. But the other day it got bad.” Tom looked down at the floor. The fidgit was straining under his fingers. His eyes burned. “He broke a bowl.”

“A bowl?”

“Yeah,” said Tom, voice tight. “A bowl.”

They hadn't expected it.

Or, maybe they had. It was just that the subtleties of his anxiety had started out small. *A hesitant wave here. A worried glance there. He hadn't reached out for physical affection, but Maddie was always the first to squeeze Tom's elbow and whisper, "give him time." And so they had.*

Given it time.

But Time had not been kind. Especially on that Wednesday night, crowded about in their kitchen, putting away the last of the bowls and wiping suds of their hands. They'd watched Sonic, hopping from stool to stool at the island. “It was amazing!” He did a backflip off the stool, racing around the island, zipping a path back and forth across the kitchen, laughing. “The gym teacher chose Dustin and Rachel to be team captains for kickball and they fought over me !” He threw out his foot in a kick, laughing. “So I was on Rachel’s team. We totally won. By the way. As if there was any doubt.”

“That’s great, bud!” Tom reached out a hand for a high-five and Sonic met him halfway. “So then we’ll definitely think about baseball tryouts, then? Unless you’re too busy being kickball champion.”

“I’m the champion of life!”

Maddie had snorted, taking out the ice cream, and lining up bowls on the counter. “Tryouts are in a few weeks. So you might need to dominate other sports, first.” She leaned on the counter. “I was a pretty fierce soccer player when I was your age. Maybe we could go out and play in the park sometime.” She gave her hair an easy flip. “I’ll go easy on you.”

“Oh, it’s a challenge , now?”

“It always is.”

“You’ll regret that.”

“Oh will I?”

“Then again, not many have the distinct honor of losing to Green Hill Middle School’s Blue Lightning .”

*“*Blue Lightning*?”*

“Trademark pending. Carl got Blue Devil already. I checked.” He grinned. “And tomorrow, we’re playing basketball! And if Rachel chooses me again-”

It was an accident.

Really.

He was bouncing, cheering, talking, and it only took one errant jump for his hand to hit the counter and for one of the bowls sitting too close to the edge to tumble

tip

roll

and crash to the ground.

The bowl shattered.

Glass splayed out across the floor in a graceful arc. The sound, like wind chimes, echoed playfully off the ceiling. “Oh shit,” Tom said, stepping away in his socked feet. “Great. Maddie, mind handing me that broom?”

“Course.” She 'd clucked her tongue. “And I really liked that bowl, too.” She carefully stepped over in her socked feet, avoiding some of the smaller pieces. “Sonic. Honey. Can you leave? I don’t want you to step-”

There was a sharp, agonized noise.

Maddie looked up, hand still on the broom, handing it over to Tom.

“Sonic?”

It didn’t take long to find him.

Standing still by the island, he’d tucked his hands to his chest. The smile was gone. “Oh…” he said, softly. “Oh- I… I -”

“Sonic?” Maddie stepped over more glass. “Come on, let’s move you away.”

“I didn’t-” He didn’t move, staring at the floor and the glass, like it would split in two and swallow him beneath. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry!”

“Hey…” Maddie looked over at Tom. But he was too busy watching Sonic, brow furrowed. “Hey, it’s alright. It’s just a bowl-” She reached out.

Her fingers never landed.

He shuddered. Stuffed his hands against his mouth. They never saw him move. He was there, and then he wasn’t.

“Sonic!?” Tom moved quick, just barely avoiding stepping on a large piece of glass. “ Shit - Sonic? Where-”

Maddie grabbed his elbow.

He was there, in the corner of the kitchen, pressing himself hard at the juncture of the walls, waiting to disappear into plaster and paint.

“I’m so, so sorry.” Body wound tight, he jammed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “I didn’t mean to! Please- I- I- I didn’t mean to! I didn't- I’m sorry - I didn’t mean to-!” The edges of his quills began to thread blue. Apologies left him quicker and quicker until they were little more than fallen words.

“Oh- Oh whoa there!” Tom jumped over broken-bowl, skidding on hardwood, getting to him before sparks could start to fly. His ribs were squeezing tighter. He swallowed back panic. Calm voice. Calm, calm voice . “Sonic? Hey bud.” He sat on the floor, brushing some glass out of the way. In front of him, the hedgehog choked on a sharp, aching noise. “Hey there. It’s alright.”

Another ripple of sparks.

Maddie followed along beside Tom, ducking her head to try to catch a glimpse of his eyes between his fingers.

More sparks twinged.

“Hon?” Maddie shifted closer. “Think you could do something for me?”

Sonic shook his head, hands pressing harder against his eyes.

“Just a little thing?”

Shake.

“That’s okay,” said Tom. “But think you could try?”

Sonic didn’t shake his head. They took it as a good sign.

“Think you could breathe for me?”

Another few sparks crackled off his quills.

“Sonic.” Maddie shifted forward again. Broken shards of bowl parted around her ankles. “In and out.”

The boy’s fingers curled. His arms quivered. But he did manage a few pulls of air. And eventually, under easy, firm instruction, the blue bolts finally - finally - died away.

“Good.” Maddie stood. “Alright. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Sonic had finally managed to drop his arms and stood in front of them, staring at the floor, the walls, the broken bowl. His voice rasped, exhausted, like it had been dragged and worn. He looked tired. And small. And defeated.

Maddie gave her fingers a wiggle, waiting for his hand. He carefully took it. “Just outside,” she said. “Think you could manage a walk?”

He nodded, still avoiding their gaze.

He only paused once in the doorway, looking back at Tom and the broken ball. He turned away quickly, though, ducking his head away.

Be back*, mouthed Maddie.*

Tom nodded, clutching the broom, heart slamming against his chest.

And they’d left.

Tom cleaned up the glass. Ozzie sat on the couch by the window, watching outside, whining. The air smelled like electricity, and felt dense.

When Maddie and Sonic eventually did get back, the sky had long since shuttered up, and Sonic was somewhat back to himself.

They didn’t speak of it again; The Great Bowl Incident of 7:35 PM.

They didn’t give her much information.

But what they did give her was enough.

The child broke something, and the fear he showed was deep. A deep seated, emotionally imbalanced fear. The sort that points to a certain amount of abandonment. An obsessive cycle of doubt and self worth. Everything was tracked and weighed. *Could this be the moment where...* was always a thought on the front of their brain. One move deemed wrong could trip the cycle into a frantic spinning that was hard to come out of.

If you make a mistake they won't love you

to

You're not good enough

to

You can't do anything right

to

Maybe I can do this, if I just don't make another mistake

to

If you make a mistake they won't love you

Again. And again. And again.

It was the most perverse of carnival rides. She'd had patients who came in before, deep in the midst of cycles. It was hard to break free of them. Harder, when you'd been left behind before.

And wasn't that just the way, she thought, looking down at her notes, and then up at the anxious parents, watching her for an answer that was too complicated to give in a single session.

Dr. Alice Burdett had seen abandonment before. In children. In adults. Emotional abandonment left complicated and deep seated wounds. Dr. Burdett knew those. Knew that they left people feeling like they couldn't make mistakes or speak out of turn.

Knew that they were afraid to lose what they'd finally gotten.

Dr. Burdett looked at the scared parents of a child who was scared himself.

A faceless, nameless child.

"So…" She leaned back, breathing in, holding it, and breathing out slowly. "He had a panic attack."

"A *total* panic attack," agreed Maddie.

"The attackiest." Tom's sharp humor came back.

Hiding his fear.

She watched him carefully. He did a terrible job, at the end of the day. Hiding fear that he couldn't help someone he loved behind dry humor. A really, really shitty job. "You know… it could be because he's new. He's normally a happy kid. And he was always super excited about *everything* . Really."

"I'm not saying he's *not* , Mr. Wachowski." He blinked up at her. "He's probably a very happy kid. But… do you know anything? About where he came from?"

Maddie looked at Tom.

Tom looked at Maddie.

"I think," he said, finally, "that he's been alone."

Beside him, Maddie took in a long, shuddering breath. "Completely," she said. "He's been completely alone."

Dr. Alice Burdett looked down at her pad. She tapped it twice with her pen. She hummed. “Of course,” she nodded.

Yes, she thought. Exactly what she’d predicted.

A child alone. Abandonment issues. Self worth. A lack of place. A desire to be seen and found.

She got up from her seat, laying the pad and pen to the side. “So,” she said, moving around to her desk, pulling open drawers. “You’re saying he’s been *completely* alone for ten years.”

Maddie hummed, nodding. “For ten *years* . He’s basically been watching everyone in our town from the sidelines.”

“And do you notice things in his behavior? Besides the panic? Signs of… neglect? Maybe- avoiding physical affection or-?”

The words fell out of Tom. “We’ve never hugged him.” Dr. Burdett looked up, watching the parents.

And there-

Right there-

The slightest *slip* of Tom’s mask. Good. That was something.

“No physical affection?”

“He… he sort of ducks away.”

He was a parent. This man, on her too-puffed couch, was a parent.

He wanted to squeeze his son tight. Tell him that everything was going to be okay. That the world was big. But he was a *dad* , which meant that he was bigger and stronger than the meanest things the world had in store.

He wanted to lift the kid onto his shoulders during the playoffs. Wanted Maddie to be able to snatch him up after she came home from work. Wanted so much-

Dr. Burdett felt for these parents.

Even if the red light blinking in her head hadn’t stopped it’s frantic *twirling* .

Faceless boy.

Nameless son.

Strange Town.

Honestly, she should have probably politely told them that their case didn't have enough information. That she needed more than they were offering. That she couldn't give therapy to

someone who was as undiscoverable as a phantom.

But these were parents. Scared, helpless parents. And a child who was crying out for help. A child that they could lose, if they weren't careful about how they approached it.

She wanted to help parents.

She came back to her chair again, holding a peice of paper. "Look," she said. "I don't doubt that he's a happy kid. I don't. At all. But I've worked in this business a long time, and you start to notice a thing or two about kids who are alone for too long." She passed over the paper. Maddie picked it up, and Tom looked over.

Four Stages of Trauma Recovery

A Guide to Healing and Wellness

"Trauma?" She heard the word catch in Tom's throat.

"If he's been alone that long…" Dr. Burdett smiled. "I know it's a big concept. I get it."

"What…?" Maddie sat up a little straighter. Her face was hard; determined. "What do we do from here?"

"Well? I'd love to suggest that *he* came in for a visit." Their jaws hardened. "But until *you're* ready for him to do that, I'd suggest you keep coming here. Talk through the progress. We can follow the four steps. You've already made it through the first." And the leaned over and tapped the top of the paper.

Step One : *Recognition*

"Four steps?" said Maddie, doubtfully, holding the paper in her hand like it had burned her.

"Four." Dr. Burdett smiled kindly. "It's a lot to take in. Building a family is hard. Adopting is harder. Adopting a child who needs a lot of help?" She shook her head. "It takes time. But things do get better, if you want them to."

"We do," said Tom. And he meant it. With everything in him, he meant it.

"Right then." She clapped her hands together. "Our session is over. But if you do come back, be prepared to start fresh with a plan. It won't be easy. But I think we can think of a few things to help."

They thanked her.

Filled out information on a clipboard.

Left, the folded bit of paper between them.

Dr. Alice Burdett had been a psychologist in Missoula (a town just fifteen minutes out of Green Hills), for fifteen years. She had seen patients old and young. She had discussed obsessive behaviors, night terrors, phobias. She'd seen couples fighting, singles wanting, families healing.

But something about the new couple was interesting.

She sat in her office after they'd left, flipping back and forth through her notes.

Dr. Alice Burdett had been a psychologist for a long time.

She could tell when people were lying.

And this couple was…

… well.

Their child was a ghost. He had no name.

He had no face.

And their town had shuttered away all of its information.

She didn't know much else besides their names.

Tom and Maddie Wachowski. A vet. A sheriff. Newly adopted parents.

It was intriguing.

They loved him, to be sure. But they were tentative in their affection. Terrified of their own failure of something so new and important. But willing to leap canyons to get it right. After all, they'd sat in her office, on her couch, desperate for ways to help. Pleading for answers to a question they hadn't even begun to understand.

She looked down her page, tapping her pen down a few different scrawled notes.

-couple is scared

-new family

-child has panic attacks

-child scared of abandonment: previous isolation? alone for long stints? Ptsd

-CBT recommendation

-parents have yet to file adoption

She paused on the last one, tapping her pen a few times, reading it over again.

Curious , she thought. *Very curious* .

“Hey Reshma,” Alice said when she stepped out of her office. Her receptionist waved at her as she passed by. “Would you mind doing me a favor. If that couple decides to book again, let me know?”

“Of course, Dr. Burdett.”

A strange, disjointed family. A faceless son. A wayward comment about a road trip with *a lot on the line* .

Dr. Burdett wished Reshma a good night and took the stairs down, thinking abou Tom and Maddie and a panicked, scared boy while she walked the dark streets back to her car.

Sonic was waiting for them when they got home. His science homework was out on the kitchen island, half finished, but he lit up when the door opened, beating Ozzie to the door by a hundred miles a minute. “Where were you!” He twisted underfoot, zipping up to stand on top of the couch, watching them, head tilted. “God, you guys were gone for *foreeeeever* .”

“If that’s how you judge time,” said Tom, hanging his coat up in the closet, “then your teachers have their work cut out of them.”

Sonic stuck out his tongue.

Maddie snorted. “Alright, you two. Break it up.” She peered into the kitchen. “Hows homework?”

“Boring.” He zipped around the room, stopping to stand on the stairway banister, feet moving in a dance that they’d never seen, but they were *sure* was from some meme somewhere (god they felt old). “I can’t get the equations right.”

“I can help with that.” She kicked off her shoes.

“Cool,” he grinned. “And then dinner? I’m *starving* .”

“Is that all we’re good for?” Maddie laughed, hands on her hips. “Making tuna fish sandwiches?”

Worry sparked in the boys eyes.

Tom held his breath.

Maddie's back stiffened.

But just as quick, it faded away. "Basically," said Sonic, flipping off the banister. "What? You thought you were good for more?"

Tom pretended to chase him into the kitchen, and Maddie stood outside, listening to the boys howls of laughter, a twinge of something heavy in her chest.

That night, she and Tom sat on the couch, staring at a rerun, barely watching. Maddie lay against Tom's shoulder, breathing in the smell of earthy soap. Sonic had long gone to bed with tentative goodnights and waves. The most they could get out of him, really.

"So," she said. "What are you thinking?"

Tom sighed deep. "I'm thinking that I want to help our kid."

"Me too."

"So?" Tom shifted to look at her. "What do we do?"

On the table in front of them was the little slip of paper. It watched them back idly.

"I want to help him." Maddie squeezed his arm. "We're his parents. He's our kid. I want to help him."

Tom kissed the top of her head. "I'll call the therapist."

That night Dr. Alice Burdett got an email.

The couple booked again , Reshma wrote. *Saturday morning's. 8-9.*

She got out her appointment book and slotted away spots for the next few weeks.

It would be an interesting case.

She couldn't wait.

Step 2: Safety and Security

Chapter Summary

Dr. Alice Burdett explains perfection and its relationship to the cycle of trauma.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Alice came in on Saturday morning, 6:30 AM (earlier than everyone else in the practice, coffee in hand), Burt was at her door.

They'd hired Burt ages ago. He was an older, kind man with a warm face that squinted up whenever he was trying to see something too far away from him. He wore thick, black glasses that he hung onto his plain, beige work shirt. On his left lapel he wore a name-tag.

Burt

Building Repairman

"Morning, Al!" Burt belted when she came off the elevator.

Burt, she'd long ago decided, was one of the few beings on Earth allowed to call her *Al* .

"Hey, Burt. How's it coming?"

"Oh, you know." He smiled his kind, scrunched smile. "Things are moving the way they'll move."

"Course they are, Burt."

He was sitting on the floor by the doorframe. There was a screwdriver in one hand, and a new strike plate and knob was at his knee. "Figured I'd start early, before you got any patients in."

"You're a *saint* ."

"You'll flatter me into a heart attack, Al."

Alice stepped over him, apologizing for the intrusion of his hard labor, and wriggled her way into the office.

They'd hired Burt a year and a half ago. They'd never needed a building repair man before then. Actually, in her fifteen years working for the practice, they'd never needed any sort of constant maintenance. It had always been the same humdrum, occasional repair. A plumber here. A painter there. The one time another therapist opened a door too hard and cracked the wall and they'd needed to hire someone to plaster over the spot (it never looked the same - always a little indented in the light).

But then, a year and a half ago, a window had broken.

It hadn't been a big deal.

Except-

"Weird," the repairman they'd hired had said, looking at the damage. "Just *weird* ."

-it had been broken from the inside.

"Maybe someone broke it by accident," Alice pointed out. "One of our cleaners, maybe?" They came every Wednesday. Breaking things was unusual, but it happened.

The repairman shook his head. "No. Look," And he'd showed them the glass on the sides of the pane. A dark, odd pattern of zig zagging lines.

Alice had squinted at it. "What is that?"

"That," he said, "is what broke the window."

She stared.

"Heat," he explained.

"You're saying a *fire* ?"

"No," he said. "Looks more like electricity. A flux or something."

They'd chalked it up to a random event. A broken fuse in an odd location. Something they'd been lucky to avoid.

And then, the break-ins began.

First, they'd barely noticed. A shade was tilted. A door was left cracked on the inside. A pen was moved. A spot of ink on a new sheet of paper.

Whoever had broken in had tried their best to make it look like they hadn't been there. But she'd known. Looking around her office, she'd *known* . The imprints on her chair. And an Earthy smell left behind.

And footprints. On her *desk* . Odd footprints. Like two different shoes. Broken down shoes. Worn shoes. Old, old shoes.

A child's shoes.

And after that, they'd hired Burt. Burt, who came in, took one look, and changed all the doorknobs bi-monthly, watching over the place with his nearsighted squint.

"I'll be done soon, Al," he called out over the whirr of the drill.

She set down her papers, fanning them over the dark wood of the desk. "Take your time," she called back. "You want a coffee or something?"

"Two sugars."

She laughed, stepping over him again, heading towards the little employee kitchen through a door behind the receptionist's desk.

When she got back, coffee in hand, Burt was sitting up, wiping the dust off his hands with a cloth. "All done! You're good for another two months."

"You're the best, Burt."

"And you're a godsend, Al," he said back, his Midwest twang scratching up his throat when he accepted the coffee and took a long drag. "By the way," he said, after another few sips, "I forgot to tell you that we got the tapes working again."

She tilted her head, brow lowering. "Tapes?"

"Our old cameras. They were still working. Tapes though-"

"Oh. Yeah."

"Well, they finally started coming through again. We'll need to delete some stuff from the files. New system. Barely know how to operate it. But apparently we've got to delete from the past six months to make room. Anyway," he took another sip, "that's what I was doing last night, after y'all left. Deleting a bunch of tapes to make room for our exciting after-office life."

"Sure."

"And I saw something." He took a long drink, waggling his brows when he swallowed.

She stood at the door to her office, staring at him. "Sorry? You *saw* something?"

"I saw something. Freaky." He shrugged. "Might have been a glitch. But it seemed good enough of a spook to share."

"And this something was…"

"Not sure." He shrugged again. "Like I said, could be the old system. But I'll send it along before I delete it. Give you something exciting to look at."

“Yeah. Course. Thanks, Burt.”

He saluted her with his coffee, picked up his bag, and walked down the hall towards the elevator, on his way to the next floor. There were rows of offices below them, and he’d long ago commissioned out his services to them, too.

Just before her first session, Alice Burdett would get an email from Burt in her inbox. A video file was attached.

Alice Burdett [7:14]: *Thanks . I’ll check after work .*

Burt [7:22]: *You should* , he replied, eight minutes later. *I’ll keep changing locks. But if this was what was breaking in, it won’t be a new strike plate stopping it.*

Alice Burdett [7:24]: *Spooky . Can’t wait.*

Their session begins like this;

“Do you know what trauma is?

It was one of the first things Alice brought up once the couple was settled back in place on her overstuffed gray couch, shoulder to shoulder. She’d offered them tea and coffee and slid a box of tissues that most patients ignored out of pride in front of them, slipped her glasses into place, crossed one leg over the other, took up her notebook, and said, “do you know what trauma is?”

It was probably not how they expected the session to begin.

Clear enough when Maddie swallowed and Tom blinked.

First sessions were times to gather information. Second sessions were when things could begin properly and battle plans could be formulated. She’d gone over her notes with the couple from the first session and decided that if *they* were so intent on teasing her with their secrets, then she had no problem diving head first into their scummy little mystery.

“Well,” said Tom after a minute, “second session, huh? You don’t hold your punches, do you?”

Ah yes. The humor was out again. Tom spoke in patterns, and she wrote a note to herself on the top of her page. To not forget the patterns. The way he addressed everyone like they were a friend. The conversational equivalent to bobbing and weaving. And Tom was the Mike Tyson of evasion.

Fifteen years of experience. She knew a thing or two by now.

To anyone outside the office it might have seemed like he was being helpful. Wonderful. Witty and smart and kind. The complete essence of *Eu De Holding-It-Together* . But she knew.

“I like to dive in quickly,” she said, calmly, tapping her pen on the notebook.

“Of course,” said Tom, his face a mask of perfect, easy cooperation. His smile was perfect. His shoulders were relaxed.

Her eyes were just as soft as his when she smiled back. Her gaze was anything but. *Oh just you wait, you son of a bitch.*

“So. Trauma.” She poised her pen over paper. “What do you know about it?”

“It’s when something terrible happens. Leaves a lasting impact.” Tom’s head fell back a little. “I’ve… seen it before. Officers who-” He paused. “I know there are some bad men on the force. But the good ones who see things- it doesn’t leave them the same.”

Alice nodded. “That must be hard.”

His jaw ticked. “It is.”

Maddie squeezed his hand.

“You’re right,” said Dr. Burdett. “Trauma can certainly come from a single event. There are lots of patients who come through trying to work through singular moments.”

“So- our son,” Maddie said, shifting forward. “A few weeks ago, he was through something.”

“Really?”

Tom nodded. “There was… an event.”

“What sort of event?”

The couple stayed quiet.

“What *can* you tell me about the event?”

“It was… violent.” That was how Tom began it, his voice catching on something brief. “Someone was trying to *hurt* him. A lot of bad people were after him. And now- I mean. There’s still people…”

He stopped there.

Maddie picked up where he’d left off. “It was a really bad situation. When we found him, he was already trying to get away, and we sort of- well. *Tom*- Tom fell in with him. And we got him out together once everything was wrapping up.”

“Once the trouble was wrapping up, you mean?” She made a note to herself to look up recent disasters once they’d left. Anything attached to their names. Though she doubted she’d find much. Still. It was worth a try. She’d always been tenacious.

“That’s how we met him. And now… he’s with us.” Maddie punctuated her sentence with an uncomfortable laugh, eyes drifting away from Alice’s, like if she looked for too long she might say something she’d regret. Like even *that* had been too much. “Race car bed and everything.”

Alice wrote a few notes, nodding.

-Violent history

-Lack of stability

And then, more to herself than anyone else

-Did couple want kids prior?

“So,” said Tom, sitting straighter, and she looked up from her notes, pen leaving a dark blob on the lines. “That’s where you think his… *trauma* is from? From having to- uh. Go through something?” He still said the word like too-hot tea. *Trauma* . Like it burned his throat.

Dr. Burdett uncrossed her legs and recrossed them.

“Well,” she said. “I think…”

“You think?” he prompted, easy demeanor beginning to quiver.

“I think that trauma is a little more complicated than that, Tom.”

Something psychologists learn early on is that the first few days in therapy are always the hardest ones. There are always harder days. Days where people speak about loss. Days where people remember awful abuses, and days where they recall childhoods that were riddled in despair. Those were hard days. The hardest days.

But somehow, the first days were always the hardest.

The first days were full of skeptical people who expected their fixes to be quick.

Days where people expected *fixes* .

It was never how it worked.

Those people never wanted to know that therapy was full of slow treatments. Agonizingly slow treatments made up of tools and behavioral conditionings.

Alice couldn’t imagine how parents felt, waiting for her to gift wrap the cure for their child. Tie a bow around it and say, *look! I made your son better! Have a nice day, and please pay your balance at the desk!*

“I think,” said Alice Burdett, “that it could definitely play a role.”

Tom’s nails dug into his knee. “A *role* …?”

(Code: Fear, Doubt, Anxiety, *WhyDon'tYouKnow*)

"I think the real issue is a little more complicated. And I'd like to start discussing that."

And here was the infamous Issue Number Two.

Alice Burdett had always liked riddles. She liked problem solving. It was why she became a therapist. To pick apart the knots people tied themselves up into.

However, Alice Burdett did not like *guessing games* .

And this couple was all about obfuscation.

So, it stood to reason, that whatever they were here for, she had to guess.

(Thankfully, she was an excellent guesser. And as annoying as it was, she could take a shot in the dark about their kid. A lot of shots.)

"Why don't you bring me through an average day with him. What sorts of things you notice."

The fidgets were still on the table between them, and Tom's eyes drifted down towards the little Silent Clicker she'd gotten months ago that the kids loved so much. And while Tom eyed those like a starving monk, Maddie shifted forward on the couch and did her best to describe.

They did not expect their days to be average. There was no illusion that anything about their life would be average after they'd dragged an entire life's worth of furniture into their attic and let a blue space hedgehog take up residence.

It was just that…

… they didn't expect the behavior .

It was subtle. Always so subtle.

A stammer. A stutter. A shift sideways. An uncertain glance.

Everything came with an expiration label. Like a moment could end abruptly in shaking and backtracking and stumbling. And apologies. So many apologies.

"I'm sorry," Sonic said, when he dropped guacamole on the carpet.

"I'm so sorry," Sonic panicked, when he left an uncapped marker on a couch.

"I'm so, so sorry," Sonic whispered, when he ran too quickly up the stairs and scuffed the landing. "I'm so, so, so sorry…"

And everything was cautious.

So, so very cautious.

Dinners were especially hard.

Maddie and Tom had made it a point to have a family dinner every night. Except Saturdays. They'd reserved Saturday as movie night, and had started making a big hoopla about it. Putting out blankets on the floor. Making pizzas. Sitting with their backs against the couch, their fingers greasy, Sonic sandwiched between them trying his best to explain why Keanu Reeves deserved a place beside the Statue of Liberty.

"He's the only reason our country hasn't fallen apart yet," he told them confidently, biting through a slice of pepperoni pizza. "I'm telling you-"

"Oh, is that right?"

Tom had decided on the movie that week. And Sonic had been skeptical about Bill and Ted *until he saw who starred.*

"It's true! It's so true!" Sonic twisted away from the television to stare up at Tom. And Tom had watched back.

Sonic between them. Reciting lines of movies, laughing and snorting and licking cheese grease off their fingers. Their chests had been so full. Things had been so right.

But when Keanu wasn't there to save them, when the table was set and the silverware laid… Six out of seven nights were spent knowing that something was wrong.

So very wrong.

"So," Maddie began on a Wednesday night, stabbing a green bean with her fork. "how was school."

Tom grinned, watching Sonic shift on his seat. "I know you had that kickball tournament today. Bet you totally wiped the floor with half the class!"

Sonic smiled back.

It was like watching a performance. A perfectly timed, perfectly orchestrated performance. They could almost see the stage directions between each of his moves.

(Draw curtain. Lights. Stage left.)

"It was great," he said. "So, so great! I'll have to show you some of my new moves this weekend. If you want to see them." And then he went to pick up his fork carefully.

(Stage right. Project. Smile.)

Maddie looked at Tom.

Tom looked at Maddie.

“Did you have anything you wanted to do this weekend?” Maddie asked, prodding.

Sonic shrugged, still smiling. “Whatever you want to do. It’s all good with me.”

(Take a bow.)

“Please,” Maddie said to Tom after dinner, listening to the quiet above them. Sonic never walked too loudly. He never played music out loud. His presence was a purposeful, careful silence. “Please tell me you notice it, too.”

“Yeah…” He handed her a dish to dry, staring down at the suds. “Yeah. I do.”

“It’s like he practices for dinner, Tom.”

“I know.”

“I don’t- I don’t know what to do.”

Tom opened his mouth. Closed it again.

That was enough of an answer for them both.

Alice Burdett wrote down what Maddie gave her. What little Maddie gave her.

“So,” she said, tapping her pen against her notes. “Just to review. Your child… you think he’s practicing for any sort of quote-on-quote *family time* .”

“I do.”

Tom was still busy pretending like he wasn’t eyeing the fidgets and nodded alongside her. “And it’s everything,” he added, easily. “Dinners. Sports. Everything is-”

“Perfect?”

They both nodded. Tom shoved his hands under his thighs.

She dragged in a long, deep breath. “Alright.” She steepled her fingers above the paper, looking down at the short list of notes she’d jotted down. “The first thing that you need to know about trauma is that it can stem from a few different things. Which means that how it eventually gets displayed is unique from person to person. Some people get violent. Some shut in. But with kids, especially newly adopted ones, it’s common for them to try and manage something they’re not even aware of with perfection.” She crossed one leg over the other, snatching up her pen to tap it against her chin. She flipped to the next page of her notebook and drew a large circle. On the circle she wrote;

-Perfection

Dr. Burdett tilted the paper towards Maddie and Tom. “Tell me if this sounds familiar. He acts as perfect as he can. Puts on a song and dance about how great school is. Does everything on time. Puts his shoes on the right rack.” Her pen slid down the line of the circle to the second point. “And then something happens. He smears chocolate on the rug. He makes too loud a noise. He breaks a *bowl* . Then suddenly,” and the pen slid down again, “there’s a reaction. A total shut down. Panic attack. Whatever you want to call it.” The third point. “He’ll act like nothing happened after he calms down. And then…” And she moved the pen-point back up, up, up towards the first word again. “... we start over again. And you’ve got your perfect kid back.”

“Yes!” Maddie’s hands flung out, fingers fluttering. “That’s it. That’s *exactly it* . It's *every time!* He's- he's so *careful*. Everything is planned out. I feel like he practices conversations. I really do."

Tom, beside her, ever the cool-presence, nodded. “Yeah. That’s pretty much what it’s like.”

“And that is where we get into trauma. What do you know about… your child? About how alone he was, before he came to you?”

Maddie took the lead, clearing her throat and staring at the Trauma Circle on the paper, doing her best to keep her feet from tapping. “We don’t… know a lot. Beyond what we know *now* , I mean.”

“And what do you know now?”

Maddie stared at the circle. Tom stayed cool.

“What do you know,” Alice Burdett restated, “that you’re willing to tell me?”

Apparently - it wasn’t a lot.

Maddie knew that he’d lived somewhere nearby for a long time.

Tom knew that he’d been alone. Very, very alone.

“He’s still trying to figure out how to live with people,” Tom explained, choosing each word carefully, dangling them out between them. “He’s been… on the sidelines. For a long time. And this whole process isn’t easy.”

“It’s hard seeing him like that,” said Maddie.

“Like what?”

“Like…” she fiddled with the edge of her shirt. “So *fragile* .”

Alice nodded, slowly. “And you don’t know what might have… started all this? Besides the loneliness?”

Maddie shook her head.

“And you’re not sure the extent of the loneliness? Like… what his daily routine was like? Nightly? What sorts of things he went through?”

Another shake.

(They’d thought about it.

They’d absolutely thought about it.

Maddie beside Tom. Tom beside Maddie. A world between them. Lying on the bed, fingers laced through the sheets, they’d wondered more and more about what it must have been like for Sonic before he found his way to them.)

(But…)

“So-o-o,” Alice said, dragging out the word. “Have you asked?”

Dr. Alice Burdett was not a novice at her job.

Dr. Alice Burdett had worked with patients trying to help other people before.

Dr. Alice Burdett knew exactly how this worked.

They never expected it. But she did. A person who came in looking for help for someone else, spilling out their own insecurities on the hand-me-down office carpet.

They weren’t *willing* to ask. They hadn’t, yet.

Dr. Alice Burdett looked up at the clock and almost cursed, but bit down on her cheek instead. “Unfortunately,” she said, “We’re almost out of time.”

Maddie looked back at the clock and stared. “Oh,” she said, surprised. Tom didn’t look at the clock. Tom refused to look at the clock. He was focused on her, instead.

You haven’t fixed anything , was clear on his face. Alice Burdett could see that. She saw it too clearly. *You haven’t fixed anything, and I don’t trust you yet* .

Just you wait Tom Wachowski , she sent back with just as much ire. *Just. You. Wait* .

She stood up and brushed off her skirt, setting down her pad of paper and the Trauma Circle along with it. “Same time next week, then?”

“Hold on.” Maddie had begun to rise when Tom stuck out a hand. “We can’t go yet.”

“You can’t?”

“What about the first stage! The last time- you said that there were four stages.”

“There are.”

“So-” asked Tom, shifting forward on the couch, closer to her. “You said we could help him. With four stages.”

And there.

Right there.

She’d found it.

The mask shifted down.

“I did.” She did her best to keep her smile serene.

“And?” said Tom, pressing himself even more forward into her space. “What’s the first step?”

Alice Burdett tilted her head carefully. She was going to wait a few more sessions at least to begin discussing steps with them. Five or six at least. She’d wanted to weed out any sort of information she could manage from the Mysterious Wachowskis in their terribly mysterious town with their *infuriatingly* mysterious lives.

But something was shifting.

Looking at Tom now, hand still extended, mask just barely slipping, she felt things shift.

They’d come in to discuss their son. Their nameless, faceless legally-not-theirs son. And instead of laying out the son’s problems, Tom had instead, accidentally dumped his own onto her lap.

Her intention had been to wait.

She really was going to have waited.

But… but *oh* . It was just getting so interesting. And watching Tom fix his mask back into place, waiting for her answer, she decided that typical schedules could go suck eggs. She was going to try and drag the Coolness off of him and see what lay underneath. And if this was her in? Well then… she couldn’t say no to a good window.

“You’re right,” she said, “I did say that, didn’t I?” She got up and went to her desk. When she returned, it was with a new sheet of paper. Tom took it.

Their session ends like this;

“The first step is beginning to break apart the cycle. We call it Safety and Security. Layman's terms.” She pointed down to the paper, where a helpful looking stick figure man waving up

from beside bullet points had those words floating above his head in a speech bubble. “You'll need to be gentle about it. You need to offer proof that your son has both."

Maddie looked over the paper, scanning the words. "How do we do that?"

"We'll go over more techniques next week. But I'd start with some exercises. You don't need to discuss them with him. I’d actually prefer if you didn’t. Not yet. Give him time to adjust to actions above words.”

Maddie fiddled with a corner of the paper, wearing it thin. “How?” She asked again, quietly.

“I’d start with honing in on imperfection and mistakes. Address it as it happens. And when he messes up, *and he will, at some point, mess it up* , you help him.”

“Wait…” Tom’s eyes hardened. “You want us to… what? *Induce* panic attacks?”

“Mr. Wachowski-”

“That’s *insane* .”

“No. It’s safe.” She sighed, crossing her arms. “Your home is a safe space. You’re inducing something in a controlled environment.”

“That sounds…” Maddie swallowed. “That sounds *horrible* .”

“It might be,” Alice nodded. “But your job is going to be to watch. Learn what triggers him. Change isn’t comfortable. What’s important is that it’s measured and guided. So help him make mistakes. And then do it again. Start over. Show him that it’s fine. That there isn’t an intrinsic weight in something he considers to be a life-altering mistake. It’s easier said than done, but…”

Tom was getting restless. She could see it. The mask, slipping again.

Good.

“You still haven’t told us *how* , Dr. Burdett.”

She smiled and hoped it looked as wry as it felt. “I hope you like baking, Mr. Wachowski.”

Tom, as it happened, hated baking.

He was alright at cooking. He could make a mean grilled cheese. His chili was pretty great. He’d claimed more than once to Maddie that his hamburgers deserved reverence.

But he hated baking.

It was all measuring. And waiting. And math.

Tom hated all three.

But Tom didn't hate the two people at the kitchen island.

No. Tom loved them. Adored them. Ignored the pinch in his gut for them.

And so Tom did this pointless exercise for them. Even though, by all accounts, it made no sense.

That's what he told Maddie in the parking lot of the supermarket after their therapy session, turning off the ignition and twisting towards her.

"This is pointless."

"We should try it."

"But it's pointless," he said again. "We're taking up a whole hour of our Saturday - a day I don't work and could *be spending with our kid who needs us there - and we're instead with an expensive doctor who tells us to* bake *."*

"It could work, Tom."

"There's no way she got her PhD in baking, Maddie. This is pointless."

Maddie unclipped her seatbelt. "Fine. It's pointless. So stay in the car. But I'm going in there to pick up everything for oatmeal cookies."

"Those are terrible."

She glared.

"If we're going to pay a doctor to tell us to bake, we make chocolate chip."

"Then stop whining, come in with me."

"I've never done this!" Sonic was leaning over the bowl, grinning, carefully adding flour as Maddie instructed. He did everything so carefully, like it would have broken in half. Careful and cautious. "I used to watch it all the time in the morning! If I got up early - really early - I could go and watch the bakers in that cafe in town and…"

The smile he'd had on before began to drop. They watched it.

Watched it, moment by moment, slip away.

He petered off, looking between the two of them before staring back down at the flour.

And then, just as quickly, it was back. An absolutely symmetrical, picture perfect, cocky grin. "Anyway; I've never done *this* before! 'can say I've tried it now." He dumped in another cupful of flour, blinking through the white puff.

Tom looked at Maddie over the recipe book. "Well, bud," He said, dragging his finger along the recipe, eyes flickering up towards Maddie,"we're going to have to get you through a lot

of firsts, huh?"

"Mmm. What do I do next?"

"Teaspoon of baking soda," said Maddie, looking over Tom's shoulder.

Tom slid over a yellow box without looking.

Which was probably a mistake when the cookies came out flat as a board.

The next few minutes work something like this;

Sonic ended up with his fists against his eyes. "So stupid," he choked. "I'm- I'm sorry, guys. I'm really- it was baking soda! I shouldn't have- I ruined-" His fur began to spark. His chin quivered.

Dr. Alice Burdett had given them a piece of paper and a ticking time bomb. She'd known it would happen. Set him up with a mistake and wait, wait, wait.

It was only so long.

But with Sonic, the anthem was usually Only So Long.

When he broke a vase, scuffed the doorframe, dropped the leash walking Ozzie. They could be Only So Long before he turned quiet and reserved and hid in his room. Or, if they were less lucky, singed a window or two.

"Honey-" Maddie was down first, sitting cross legged in front of the boy. "Honey, it's okay-"

"I messed them up!"

Tom looked down at the cookies on the tray. He picked one up. It was like holding a soggy, chocolatey pillow.

"You got everything!" The walls glowed blue with each wayward spark. "You got everything and I-"

Show him that it's fine. Dr. Burdett had said. *That there isn't an intrinsic weight in something he considers to be a life-altering mistake.*

So, holding the soggy, chocolatey pillow in his hand, he sat down next to Maddie. He split it in two. Some of the chocolate oozed out and fell onto the floor. He offered half to Maddie, who watched him, confused. He gave the cookie a little waggle (ignoring more of the soggy bits that fell onto the floor) and cocked his head towards the blue hedgehog still digging his fists against his eyes.

"You want some, Sonic?"

Sonic sparked and sniffled. " *Sorry* ," he whispered again.

Tom's ribs squeezed against themselves, pulling his heart back against his spine. But he kept going anyway. "Not answering my question, bud." And he extended a leg to softly kick Sonic's socked foot. Sonic peeled his fists away, blinking wetly up at them. "I asked if you wanted some." And he popped a piece into his mouth.

Maddie did the same, licking off her thumb.

Sonic sniffled again, and the blue sparks began to ease away. "I messed up," he said. "I'm *sorry* . You guys- you bought all this stuff. You spent- you went out and you- you got all this stuff and I messed up."

Tom threw another piece into his mouth. "Sure. Maybe. But hey, you said you'd never done this before, right?" Sonic nodded, wiping his eyes. "They aren't bad for a first try. Better than what I could do."

"And we got enough stuff to try again," Maddie explained softly. When she was sure that she wouldn't get shocked, she reached out and grabbed Sonic's hand. He jolted at the touch, but his fingers wound tighter into hers, like he was afraid she'd made a mistake and would pull away. She only held on tighter. "Mistakes happen, Sonic. That's just how it goes when you try things. Mistakes *happen* ."

"… yeah"

"And then we try again."

"… *yeah* ."

"So no more apologies," she said, giving his hand another squeeze before letting go. He didn't have time to miss her touch before she was wiping away flour on his cheek. He leaned into the touch, starved. "Now," she said, "we ready to try again?"

He nodded.

He'd apologize a few more times after the second batch came out with too much salt and the third burned. But Maddie didn't accept them and Tom didn't hear them, and they pulled him back to the bowl.

The fourth batch came out alright.

"So," said Maddie, later that night while they cleaned down the counters, "not pointless?"

Tom wasn't sure how he felt about Dr. Burdett and her colorful papers and her sounds machines and her tiny waterfall and her glasses and the way she looked at him like she was secretly building him a Trojan Horse behind her large, well organized oak desk. But what she'd said wasn't… wrong.

Not entirely.

It was just- Sonic was so *happy* most of the time. And yeah. Most of it was fake smiles and calculated movements. But he had his moments. His bright, cheerful, unabashed moments. And planning to drag him down like that felt cruel.

But seeing him try again?

That was new.

And that was good enough for them to start planning more ideas. More things he could mess up. More mistakes that could happen beneath their roof. She'd already written down *painting living room together* and *cook dinner* .

"Not totally."

She rolled her eyes.

Sonic had gone to bed that night, exhausted from panic and hiding it terribly. But there'd been some home in the way he'd at least paused on the steps and said goodnight.

"We'll keep trying," she said, closing a cabinet and walking closer to her husband, her hand falling flat against his back. A warm, solid presence. "Not about to give up anytime soon."

"No," he said, hiding tension behind his sternum. "We'll try again."

It would be after dinner when Dr. Burdett was finally able to open her email. She had a few reminders from her receptionist, a few patients asking for rescheduling or cancelations, some insurance information that she'd had yet to put through the system.

And when she'd finally gone through most of it (and half a bottle of wine as well as three slices from a day old, reheated pizza) she finally hovered her mouse over the email from Burt.

I'll keep changing locks. But if this was what was breaking in, it won't be a new strike plate stopping it.

She clicked on the video file, pouring herself another glass of wine while it loaded. Her dog, Pavlov, trotted into the room and scratched at her leg, whining. "One minute," she said, reaching down to scratch his ear. "We'll walk in a minute."

He huffed, licked her fingers, and curled up at her feet to pout.

When the video finally did load, she took a sip of wine and watched, curiously. It was an old camera. feed. They'd updated the system when Burt had arrived, and he'd stored all the old feed in their computers, just in case they needed to file anything with the police. His week long binge of the files had been when he'd found this. Though what prompted him to send it, she had little clue.

Maybe a sense of general camaraderie.

The file was only forty five seconds long. It had been set up in the waiting room. There were never cameras in the offices. Client confidentiality was sacred above all things. The camera was settled in the corner, facing the waiting area and the four different doors that the doctors worked in. Hers was closest, beside the receptionists desk.

She watched the little bar on the screen run down blue. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty five. Forty. Forty five.

And done.

Alice frowned.

She dragged it back, frowning, and watched it again.

Nothing.

“Huh.” She clicked the reply button, typing a quick message into the box. *You must have sent the wrong file. Nothing there. Thank you for taking the time to send, though. :)*

Sighing, she looked down at Pavlov, who was still sulking. “Alright, you. big baby. Ready for a walk?”

Pavlov popped up with a yip.

She didn’t think she’d hear back from Burt anytime soon. But that night, after she’d settled herself into bed, her phone dinged beside her.

No , he wrote back. *Right file. You need to watch around 37 seconds. Pause if you have to.*

“Well. What do you think?” she said, looking over at Pavlov, who was busy gnawing on his own feet. “Should we humor him and look again?”

Pavlov gave his feet an extra gnaw.

She clicked on the video on her phone, this time. The feed pulled up across her little screen. The same image she’d watched a few times before. The office. The chairs. The receptionist's desk. The door. She watched the feed slowly file downward until it hit the end. “Either I’m going blind or he’s seeing things,” she muttered, pulling the feed back again.

Pavlov scratched his ear hard enough to nearly fall off the bed.

“Alright,” she said. “One more for the old college try.”

And she watched again.

Watched the office.

Watched the chairs.

Watched the receptionist's desk.

Watched the door-

Her phone nearly fell out of her hand.

“ *Holy shit* .”

She clambered upwards, tangling herself into her sheets. Goosebumps rose up and down her arms. Pavlov barked, scrambling towards her, her nervous energy clawing through him. “What the- what the *fuck* !”

The door.

Her door.

How he spotted it, she’d never know. But he must have watched it enough times to see it.

To watch the way her door stood still and then, ever so subtly, flickered. Like it had been *opened* . Like, through some strange static movement, it had been shifted backwards and then closed again in a split, ghostly second.

And-

And something else.

She’d thought it was a problem with the camera at first. But at exactly 37 seconds, for a split moment, the space around the door had blurred.

She played it again and again, drawing her knees closer, the space around her suddenly too large and too dark. Again. Again. Again. Pulling the little button back. Adjusting the brightness.

Again. Again. Again.

And after enough times watching it, she was able to finally notice the little blur for what it was.

A shape.

A *shape* .

Like a shadow if you squinted just so. Vaguely like arms and legs. A torso. A large head. Blurred into something opaque and barely there.

But there.

Something had been there.

Staring down at the smudge of a blur, shaking in her quivering hands, she knew against all science and reason and logic, that something *otherworldly* had been in her office.

Dr. Alice Burdett did not sleep well that night.

Chapter End Notes

A big thank you to Invader_Sam who helped beta this chapter!

I also really need y'all to go visit thebigpalooka, who drew art for this chapter, and whose art leaves me absolutely weak at the KNEES. Please go and give her lots of love! https://thebigpalooka.tumblr.com/post/616314761937895424/drew-a-couple-doodles-inspired-by

Step 2.5: In Which Alice Makes a Plan

Chapter Summary

> Dr. Alice Burdette meets with her most frustrating clients weekly in her haunted office and realizes that it would take a radical sort of plan to figure out how to solve them.
>
> Good thing she's radical.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dr. Alice Burdett had other patients.

And it was *because* she had other patients (and because she was a professional, goddammit) that she got dressed Monday morning, walked Pavlov, stuffed her keys into her pocket, slid into her car, and drove to her haunted office.

Which she hadn't wanted to do.

She'd always been a rational woman. A *realistic* woman.

Ghosts were neither.

And yet…

She'd drafted an email to Burt at least five times early in the morning, sitting in her car in the parking lot, her fingers shaking. Nothing sounded right.

Dear Burt. How would you suggest we take care of a ghost problem?

(Delete)

Good morning, Burt! So, I might be having a panic attack. Fun, right?

(Delete)

Salutations, Burtrum. Do you think the Ghostbusters might be a documentary? Do you think we could call them?

(Delete)

She gave up after the fifth failed email and stood in front of her office, staring up at the dark windows of the third floor.

“You are rational,” she reminded herself. “You are realistic. It could be a bug. Or a glitch. Or maybe you’re finally cracking. It doesn’t have to be a ghost.”

The third floor looked down at her.

The office was quiet. The sound machines hadn’t been turned on yet, and so the little room was filled with the dull thrum that every office building had; pipes, heat, air. *What sorts of ghosts break into therapists' offices?* she thought, standing in the waiting room, eyeing her door.

She turned her coffee cup nervously between her hands.

Maybe ones that need help. Unfinished business. Professional advice .

She’d seen a few films about ghosts and unfinished business. One of her favorites was about an undead man who’d risen from his grave, took over the body of Whoopi Goldberg, and made pottery. That had ended pretty well.

But she’d also seen Insidious, and that hadn’t had any pottery at all.

“All right,” she said to the empty office, “if there are any ghosts in here, I’m already booked. You’ll have to put yourself on a waiting list like everyone else.”

No one answered.

She passed the cup back and forth a few more times.

“Also,” she added, feeling like she had to, “if there *is* a ghost, please only be the pottery kind.”

Again, no one answered.

That was fine with her.

The array of clients who walked through her door were colorful.

Some of them came through to help with management of everything from OCD to anxiety, sitting across from her and explaining how they’d done that week. She loved giving assignments. It was helpful to people who lacked structure.

“Tell me where your situation was this week, Tybalt,” she said gently, rifling through her notebook for the charts she’d drawn and picking up her glasses off the desk, shoving them onto her nose. Tybalt Elkes was a man who’d come through her doors after suffering panic attacks in densely packed places. Theaters. Cities. Elevators. He’d been in a bad car accident when he was twenty-six, and that fear of being surrounded and trapped had never left.

“Probably a six,” he said, honestly, looking down at his hands.

“A six,” she said, drawing a dot on the chart. “Look, Tybalt. I know you don’t think it, but this is progress. Remember when you came in? You were an eleven out of ten. And now…” she drew a little line from the dots she’d charted on each appointment date; the place written beneath. “You went into a cafe and came out feeling like it was a six.”

“I still couldn’t breathe.”

“But you thought about it. And you went in. And that was very brave.”

He smiled shyly, and relief sagged his shoulders.

There was another man named Mr. Gimble, who had lost his wife two years ago. Grief was always a hard thing. It came in different forms. Grief from the loss of childhood, from loss of money, loss of joy. Loss of a loved one was a unique sort of hurt. It took time. It grew. It expanded.

It had no expiration date.

He’d lived in the little house his wife and he had bought, and hadn’t left.

But she’d consider it at least the beginning of a breakthrough when he came in and said, “I drove by the shelters yesterday.”

“Did you?”

He nodded, running his hand through the thin wisps of white hair still on his head. “I’ve been thinking… might be nice to have a cat. An old grumpy one, like me.”

“I think,” she said, honestly, “that that is a great idea.”

There were more patients. Women. Men. One teenager.

She respected them all and worked hard for their futures.

At the end of the day with clients, after she’d locked her door, she turned towards the waiting room. “Goodnight, ghost,” she said. “It was nice seeing you.”

She figured that if there was a ghost, respectful was the way to go.

Just in case this wasn’t a Pottery situation.

(Insidious had ended so, so badly).

To sum it all up; Dr. Burdett’s office was a rotating door of characters (and one ghost) who needed help. They were an array of needs and wants and dreams and goals and anxieties who sat on the same chair, chose different fidget toys (except for the ghost - who hadn’t thankfully done anything in a while). And she waited for them all to arrive to help them as best as she possibly could.

And yet, it was Saturday morning, 8 am, that got her through the door the fastest.

Saturday morning, 8 am, was the Wachowski's.

This was mostly because Tom and Maddie Wachowski were a mystery.

There was some a little startling about having clients, and knowing the bare minimum. And it wasn't for lack of trying. Alice had taken her lunch break to research the town they came from. They'd told her it was Green Hills. She thought perhaps she could find an article. A picture. Anything to expand her very meager horizons.

TOWN EXPERIENCES MASSIVE STORM was the last major article. *On Monday night, Main Street, center of much of Green Hills night life, was met with a storm of massive proportions...*

She bookmarked the article and searched for more. Nothing.

Their town was as tight lipped as they were.

Granted, he was learning more about them, whether or not they liked it. That was just how it went in therapy. Clues were left behind whether they wanted them to be or not. Everything she learned, she kept on a list in their slowly expanding, but still very thin, file. She scribbled new information down quickly during sessions, flipping back and forth between notes.

Here's what she had on Maddie;

- **Maddie was a vet. She'd made empathy her profession.**
- She was kind, courteous, and patient.
- Maddie's favorite tea was chamomile.
- She loved yoga, and did it each and every morning on their patio.
- They had a dog named Ozzie that they'd adopted together two years into their marriage who she loved.

Here's what she had on Tom;

- **Likes beer and dogs.**
- Was very proud of his stupid, chiseled jaw.
- Dislikes oatmeal raisin and country music.
- Butthurt about everything

Probably not professional, but hey. She only had so much to work with.

Oh.

No.

Wait.

One more thing.

They had a mysterious and traumatized child living in their home that Dr. Burdett was 99.9% sure was real.

And they loved that 99.9% Real Son very, very much.

But the rest?

Key details were always pushed away quicker than she could catch them. Maddie would fall silent. Tom would tense his jaw and roll his eyes.

They were guarded and careful. And it was really starting to get on Alice Burdett's nerves.

During their third session, she attempted to find out more about Maddie's family.

Maddie laughed it off and said that her family was far too crazy and it would take weeks to analyze them all.

She tried again, during their fourth session, to ask Tom more about his job, his home life, his interests.

Tom just flexed his stupid chiseled jaw and said, "will that really do us any good here?" and Dr. Burdett recited her oath and had to remind herself that *throw clipboard at client's face* wasn't a part of it.

Session by Session, she played their game of cat and mouse.

They came in.

They described their child.

They told her a story about panic and fear.

She gave them a helpful tip from step one or two of the panic cycle.

Tom would claim that their boy was doing better and better while skirting around every other question he was asked.

Wash.

Rinse.

Repeat.

“You know,” she’d said to them during the last few minutes of their fourth session, “it might be helpful to give me some information about yourselves.”

Maddie had clamped up and Tom had snorted before saying, “Thankfully, we don’t overpay you to figure us out.”

Dr. Burdette smiled while she tried her best to guess how much he weighed and if she could punt all of his chiseled self out the window.

I will get you , she thought, as he stood up and grinned at her. *I will find the thing that makes you tick and I will rip it out, Tom Wachowski. Just you wait.*

He smiled back as if to say, *I’d like to see you try* .

She’d begun to talk to the ghost of the office after they’d left, sitting back in her chair and rubbing her temples. “Can you believe this?” she’d tell the ghost. “You know, I gave up a New York City job for this. I could have been watching Broadway and tap dancing on a giant keyboard like Tom Hanks. *Instead* , I’m in Montana listening to two *maybe* parents tell me about their *maybe* son and eating gross not-new-york bagels. Any thoughts?”

The ghost, as usual, said nothing.

When the paranormal proved unhelpful, she turned to other humans.

“I’m not getting anywhere with them,” she told another one of the therapists who worked at the center. His name was Dr. Martins. He was a lovely older gentleman in his 60’s, who wore 80’s dayglo sweaters and sported a large, brown-gray beard. He worked twice a week in an office across the hall from hers.

“All they do is *evade* , like I’m interrogating them or something! Especially the husband. You’d think we were playing dodgeball the way we’re jousting in there.”

Dr. Martins hummed into his coffee. “What about a different point of access then. It’ll be impossible to change the subject. But you can always change the therapy.”

She chewed her lip and nodded, already running through a few different methods in her head. She muttered a thanks and went to write them down. Their session was still a few days away, but preparing for it had become like mapping out a battle, and she was determined to be prepared.

Tom was getting frustrated with her.

Their fifth session focused solely on the cycle of perfection. She asked how their son [name redacted] had been doing, and they told her *vaguely* that they’d been baking their town’s grocery store [name also redacted] out of flour.

“He’s doing better about apologizing,” Maddie said, clinging to a very stringy sense of hope. “He still does it. And everything still feels practiced.”

Dr. Burdett nodded, carefully watching Tom from the corner of her eye. He sat in a way that was meant to be casual, but she could see the ways his jaw ticked and the way his arms, crossed over his chest, were folded tight.

“I keep telling you,” he said, leaning back, “he’s doing better. These exercises we’re paying you for, they’re working.” He crossed a leg over the other, glaring at her across the space. “Can you just give us the third step so we can move on?”

“ *Tom* ,” Maddie snapped.

He let out a sigh, staring sulkily down at his knees.

Alice let out a deep breath. *Calm yourself* , she soothed. *Whale noises, singing bowls, relaxing shit. Just calm yourself. You’ll figure them out* . She put on her best I’m-a-Therapist smile and lifted her pad up for them to see. “Let’s talk about trauma again,” said Alice. “Trauma and Trauma Recovery all have their own cycles. I know we’ve gone over them. But I think it’s important to review.” She showed them the list on paper.

1. Routine
2. Event
3. Withdrawal
4. Awareness
5. Action
6. Integration.

“We’re here right now,” she said, pointing to the first. “When you first came in you were probably…” she dragged the pen down, “here.” She pointed to awareness. “So you’ve begun

to take action. You've integrated. And that's great. But I don't want you to think of this as an end all be all. This list doesn't end for people who suffer trauma. It's a circle. I can't just launch you into a new step, because there's no way to tell yet how he'll be affected. It's all dependent on where he is *here* ." And she pointed again to the line of words on the page. "The last thing we need is to aggravate the situation by launching him off a sensitive step."

"So we need to find a way to… stop it," said Maddie, eyeing the list.

"Not stop," said Dr. Burdett. "Manage. There's no stopping it, really. Trauma is different for everyone.

Tom's crossed arms tucked tighter around his torso. "So there's no solution."

She looked up cooly at him, turning to the next page of her notebook. "There are *many* solutions, Mr. Wachowski. But I can't hand you a bandaid. Unfortunately, for this sort of stuff, we need to poke around in the wounds, if you'll excuse the metaphor."

"The bandaid," he pointed out stiffly, "usually helps things heal, doesn't it?"

From beside him, Maddie poked her elbow into his side. His arms dropped and he hissed, turning to his wife with an unspoken *hey* .

"You're right, Mr. Wachowski," Alice said, capturing his attention again. "And in some circumstances I *would* recommend it. But in the case of your son… I don't know *much* about him, but from what you're telling me, this is more than just a few sessions and some breathing exercises." She tapped her pen against the pad. "Now… let's go over the cycle one more time."

They leave the session just as frustrated as they'd come.

Same to you, buckaroo , she thought, watching Tom glare at her as he shrugged on his jacket. *Welcome to the Frustration Station. Population, one chiseled jawed idiot* .

Sometimes, Dr. Burdett knew, that was just how the wheels of therapy turned.

And they continued to turn as time passed. Ever so slowly. Ever so frustratingly. With just as much information as before.

This was how her days in the office went;

She went into her haunted building, said hello to the pottery/demonic ghost (she'd yet to figure out which it was), she saw her other patients, and then on Saturday morning, she met with her mystery couple who were as tight lipped as tupperware. And between the empathetic but hesitant wife, and the husband who'd taken it as a personal vendetta to see how many daggers he could stare into her, she'd met her match.

It isn't until the seventh session, nearly two months into their awful back and forth, that Dr. Burdett was met with an anomaly.

It happened every so often in therapy. Hiccups, peculiarities, things that offset a session just enough to grasp a peek at what was hidden beneath the curtains their patients had built. Therapists prayed for this. Yearned for it. Did their best to wait patiently for the moment that something could knock over the normal enough to get it onto a new track entirely.

Alice Burdett knew how to spot one when it overtook her little office like the heavenly choirs shrieking hallelujah.

And it happened because Tom was running late.

“Is your husband not coming?” asked Alice, watching as Maddie hung her coat over the back of the couch, settling down on her own.

“He will be,” Maddie promised. “There was just an… issue at home?”

“Normal issue or therapy issue.”

“Normal, thankfully. So- our *son* may have tried to make us breakfast this morning. And,” her smile widened. It was an easy smile. A thankful, relieved smile. “He only apologized twice for it. Tom hung back to help him clean up. It was so sweet of him, really. He’s been trying to do more things on his own that are, you know-”

“That could lead to imperfections?”

“Yeah,” Maddie said, nodding. “And it did. Batter ended up everywhere. But!” She raised her hands, slapping them onto her knees. “It didn’t end with a panic attack. We’re counting it as a win. Tom told me to go ahead. He figured someone should help out.”

“That’s nice,” said Alice, nodding. She picked up her pen, flipping to a new page. “They spend a lot of time together, then? Tom and…” She let the *and* linger. Name Redacted seemed too on the nose.

Maddie nodded. “Yeah. The two of them- they’re the dynamic duo of the house. Moment Tom comes back from work, they’re together. My son waits at the door for him. It’s the cutest thing. He follows my husband around like a rock star. And Tom is just… he’s just *so* enamoured with this kid.” She laced her fingers together, smile wide and real. “It’s good. Really good.”

She wrote down another note. “And does that bond- does it make you jealous?”

“No.” Maddie waved it off with easy genuinity. “We have our own stuff. He comes to me when he needs me. We take walks, I say goodnight. What they’ve got? It’s a guy thing, you know?”

Alice nodded. She did know. Children, especially ones who had missed major portions of their childhood, tended to latch onto older mentors of the same gender. It gave them a sense of stability and taught them how to *be* . “That’s great. I’m happy for your son. And for Tom.”

Maddie shifted on the couch. “It’s been good for him. He needs someone to talk to.”

“Tom?”

“No. S- my son. Our son. He needs another person to talk to. He-” Maddie squirmed. Something hid beneath the surface, twisting and dragging through her conscious.

The car was shifting on its rails.

The anomaly had begun to take effect.

The spot besides Maddie had never seemed more empty or huge.

Alice moved forward in her seat. “He *what* , Maddie.”

Maddie’s eyes flickered to her left, where Tom usually sat. She swallowed, and then looked back to Alice. “He talks to himself,” she finished.

Alice tapped her pen against the pad. “Some kids do that,” she said.

“Yeah but… he *really* talks to himself. Full discussions. It’s been a habit, ever since he came to us.”

Well.

That was interesting.

“What sort of conversations.”

“About anything,” said Maddie. The flow of conversation was beginning to loosen. The train was well on its way into the next track. “Sometimes he talks to himself about his panic attacks. Sometimes he argues with himself. Sometimes he just… *talks* . Like there’s another person there. But… but he *knows* there isn’t. Whenever we catch him-

---

Maddie had found him doing it a few times.

Walking into a room and seeing his head moving back and forth.

“Can’t you just calm down for once?” Sonic asked.

His head turned. “It’s hard, sometimes! You try doing it!”

“They understand,” said Sonic.

“They can’t put up with it,” said Sonic.

“Hey- hon? What are you doing?”

His eyes had locked onto hers, his face flushed, hands tight into balls beneath his chin. “Nothing! Just… thinking!”

The first time had been odd.

The next time, when she'd found him discussing baseball stats, had been weirder.

When Tom had found him trying to understand one of the cookie recipes they'd been baking daily as a part of the mental exercises, he'd been a little lost for words. Watching his son explain it to himself *as if there was another person there.*

"I'm not sure what to do," Tom had said. "I thought it was just a… a habit. He did it when we were on the run but-"

"Give it time," Maddie said. "We've got to learn patience, too." But even she had seemed unsure.

"-he's embarrassed," she finished. "He knows, and he's embarrassed."

Which meant that it wasn't chemical. It was learned.

That sort of behavior was common, she knew, for people who'd been prisoners. She'd met one patient once who'd gone through the system. The PTSD from being put into solitary had left him with too many issues to count.

Alice's pen, which had been tapping away, paused.

Wait.

Wait .

The nifty little Code Red that had been *so loud* during their first few sessions perked up and began to rub its hand together. *Ready when you are to sound the alarm* , it leered.

When they'd first begun their sessions, Tom and Maddie Wachowski had sat across from her and said that their son (their unnamed, mystery son) had been alone.

But this was new.

This was a different level.

This was a whole new *ball park* .

She looked up at Maddie. "Mrs. Wachowski…"

"Yeah?"

"From what you're telling me… I think we need to consider that your son- I don't think he was just *alone* , Mrs. Wachowski. I think-"

The door opened.

Tom strode in, looking like he owned the office. He tossed his jacket over the couch beside his wife. "Sorry I'm late," he said, grinning his practiced, chiseled smile. "Small problem in

the kitchen." He sat down, giving his wife a smile. She looked relieved to see it. The tension in the room drifted off to a corner to sulk over Alice Burdett's shoulder. "And I got to tell you, doc. He's doing *so much better* -"

And for the rest of the hour, Tom told her about progress.

Maddie nodded and chipped in.

Alice nodded, looking between the two of them. The train forcefully veered back onto its track. But the anomaly still hung around the office, and Alice could feel it. She'd seen it. Just there at her fingertips. And what's more- the word she'd been about to say hung over her head beneath the waiting Code Red, pressing down on her shoulders.

Isolation .

Their son had not just been alone.

He'd been *isolated* .

Tom, Master of Bandaids, would have gawked at the very word. Sitting beside Maddie, talking about the *great progress* their Son was making, all Dr. Burdett could see was the stronghold he was doing his best to portray. For himself. For his wife. For the mystery son.

It was textbook projection. Create a reality and stick to it, believing that eventually everyone else will fall into it with you. He was the safe. His wife was the key. He was content to hide and mold his own stories to keep his family happy.

And Alice Burdett needed to rip that fucking bandaid off.

Preferably with as much of a sting as possible.

Maybe that would knock the dumb smile off his dumb, chiseled jaw.

At the end of the session, she once again gave them a few tips they could use between the week, watched them stand, and waved them out towards reception.

Above her head, the Code Red stood waiting.

The tension sat unused and pouting.

And just beyond that, the anomaly grew.

Alice sat back down hard in her chair and stared at her slew of notes that held the answer to *everything* , but she couldn't put her finger on it yet.

"Well," she said to no one (unless, of course, the ghost was listening). "Fuck."

The paper was still on the table beside her, and she looked down at it, rubbing the growing headache out as best she could. She'd done her best to jot down some notes ever so often, and

the paper looked like a wild explosion of words and phrases and occasional doodles of Tom getting hit with a clipboard.

But today, there'd been an anomaly. A clue. A precious morsel.

And that meant that somewhere on this crazed list of notes was the answer to how to get through to them and their 99.9% son.

And she hoped beyond hope that she'd be able to find it.

Because the longer this dragged on, the harder everything was going to be - for all of them.

At the end of the day, Alice ran into Burt again. The coffee machine wasn't working. It was menial, she knew, and she could have driven fifteen minutes out of her way to pick up something from Dunkin on the way home, but he'd been his usual Angelic self and promised to take a look. And after the day she'd had…

A cup to bring in the car on the way back home would be a godsend.

"I watched the video you sent me, by the way."

"Did you!" He smiled, fiddling with a screwdriver against the screws, "pretty spooky, huh?"

She leaned against the counter in their office kitchen. " *Pretty spooky* doesn't cover it. You scared the everloving shit out of me, you know that?"

He let out a raspy laugh. "Yeah. That's why I've been fixin' the door every few months. I kept seeing him around here."

"There are *more tapes* ?"

"No- that was the only time I caught it on camera. But the other times?" he shook his head, fiddling with a loose screw. "It was… little stuff, Al. Something out of place."

"Who knew our little office was *haunted* ." She sucked on the inside of her cheek, looking around. "I've never noticed *anything* before."

Another one of his laughs burst out; his raspy, large laugh. "Yeah. That's because I got there first. Part of my job description was erasing ghostly evidence for a while."

"Enlighten me."

He stood up, stretching his back for a moment, eyeing the coffee maker with some frustrated respect before ducking back down to face his foe. "A year or so ago, I walked in and found the window open. Thought that was weird, because you're so good at closing it at the end of the day."

"And you think the ghost opened it?"

“Ah-ah. Not finished yet. The spooky part? When I went to go close it, I found a footprint on the windowsill. A *real* footprint. I wiped it off, but it stuck up here.” And he tapped his temple with the screwdriver.

The little red light in her head began to blink. “Footprint?”

Well. That was interesting.

No.

Actually.

That was fucking *terrifying* .

She looked behind her, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up.

“Yeah. It looked like a sneaker. And it was child sized. Looked like it was trying to leave through the window. I remember thinking that maybe a kid had been in your office and had jumped around but-”

“-but I haven’t had a child as a patient in *years* ,” she finished, chewing on her bottom lip. Two years since a child had come through her office. Two *years* . Ever since he arrived, a lot of the kids went across the hall to see Dr. Martins. She understood why. He looked like a big teddy bear, with his huge brown beard and kind, crinkly eyes.

“It was after hours,” he continued, idly. “S’how I knew it wasn’t from a kid during the day. Wasn’t there when I vacuumed your carpet. But I’d forgotten the leather cleaner. So I went downstair, came back up and…” he clicked his tongue as if to say *and there it was* . “Whatever it was, it was gone. Came while I was busy. Must have heard me coming, though. Because it was out the window before the door opened.

“Shit…”

“No footprints outside, neither. Nothing to show it was there after. But… but I *knew* .”

They fell into silence. The office around them felt too large, and he shook his shoulders out. She did the same, feeling the buzz of unease beneath her skin.

Alice let out a low sigh. “You know,” she said, idly, “I think he touched my glasses, too.”

“Hmm?”

“They were all… stretched out.”

Her new pair were in her office, sitting on the desk. It was a shame, though. She’d loved that old pair.

Letting out another long sigh, she rubbed at her temples and said, “Well. Let’s hope it’s friendly.”

“I’ve never had a problem with him.”

“ *Him* ?”

Burt shrugged. “Sneaker print looked like my youngest grandsons. Some sort of old Nike or something. Like I said. Never had a problem with him. But still; I’ll keep changing your lock.”

“Much appreciated.”

He smiled, leaning up from the counter to snap the back onto the coffee machine. He pressed a button. The mechanics *whirrred* to life, and the machine gave out a happy jingly sound. “Look at that!”

“Again, Burt. I cannot stress this enough. You were heaven sent.”

“You’ll flatter me out of a job, Al.”

She left after thanking him a few more times, walking back down the empty halls towards her office to collect her things. Even with the lights on, the place felt ominous. And when her office door closed behind her, she needed to take a moment to settle her nerves.

“If there is a ghost here… whatever kind of ghost you are, *please* know that I do *not* tolerate jump scares.”

The office said nothing back.

She counted that as a good sign.

Maddie tossed the car keys towards the little table beside the door when they got home. Before they even touched down, there was a blue blur streaking down the stairs, standing in front of them as the keys jangled against the wood.

“Do you know how *boring* Saturday mornings are without you here?”

“Hello to you too, bud.” Tom hung his jacket up. “Finish your homework?”

“There’s nothing *else* to do around here.”

“Yeah yeah. God forbid we leave you for an hour each weekend.”

Sonic’s brows twitched a moment, worry sparking, but it passed quick enough, and his smile eased back like it had never left. “You promised we’d play Mario! I’ve been *waiting* .”

“For what? Me to beat you?” When Sonic stuck out his tongue, Tom laughed, reaching over to ruffle the fur on his head. “Boot up the game. *And don’t you dare take Yoshi* ,” he yelled after the blur, who was already heading for the den.

Maddie was closing the closet door when Tom turned around, his hands out. “Did you see that?”

“I *did* .”

“It’s working, Mads.” He grinned. “I told you. I told you we could handle this.”

She shifted from foot to foot, looking over towards where Sonic had vanished. Lowering her voice, she moved closer to Tom. “I really hope so. He’s been doing better this week, and I just don’t want…”

“It’s a process.” Tom grabbed her hand, squeezing. “This week might be a little rough. But there’s always next week. And the week after.” He squeezed her hand again. “We’ve *got* this.”

“... Yeah,” she said. “Maybe.”

“You’ll see. Soon we’ll be able to say *adios* to weird therapy couches and grumpy women with clipboards.”

Maddie chewed her lip, staring off towards where the noises of the game chimed through the house. There was so much uncertainty pulsing around them. A haze of *week by week by week* that kept her on her toes. A dawning reality that she couldn’t do anything to fix it unless…

Tom must have realized where her thoughts were wandering, because he wound his arms around her in a huge before she could finish them. “Mads. It’ll be okay. She doesn’t know our kid. She doesn’t know *us* . She’s there to help us manage all of *this* , but that’s it. And we’ll manage. We *are* managing.”

And Maddie could do little more than hope it were true and close her arms back around him. “Okay,” she said. “But a few more times, alright?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, chin bobbing against her shoulder. “A few more.”

Because there wasn’t anything she could do to them with just a few more. Tom was sure of it. Positive of it. Practically reeling in the confidence of it all.

“Donut Lord!” Sonic called from the other room, drawing Tom out of his head. “Yoshi’s mine if you don’t move it!”

He smiled and saluted his wife. “Duty calls!”

She watched him go, eyes on his back, stomach tight. The feelings in the house shifted about her, growing in shadows around the corners, and she turned away.

She could hope.

She could *hope* .

Dr. Burdette stood at home over the kitchen sink, her fingers covered in peanut butter, and *steamed* .

She was a firm believer of keeping work at work. It was how one stayed sane, after all. She would never be able to sleep if she brought the weight of every client home with her while she grilled salmon and folded jeans.

Her rule was broken, though, as soon as she walked in the door, threw her bag down, and began to complain. Loudly.

The issue was Alice hadn't often helped patients who were, in turn, trying to help *other* patients. She'd had a few who'd asked for help for a "friend" when it was clearly for themselves. There'd even been a child a few years back who'd explained his own traumas through the guise of an imaginary friend.

"Here's the problem," she said down to Pavlov after dinner, spooning peanut butter into his Kong. He listened very intently. "These two people came in to talk about their *son* . But it turns out that the *both* of them need so much help themselves that they're in an almost *cosmic* level of denial. So how do you help a second party, when the first party also needs help, but refuses to take it."

Pavlov stared at her hands.

"It also doesn't help that their town has gone Secrete Service. The last known news article out of there was on public record as a *massive* storm. Which blew out *our* power. Do you remember that? You freaked out and broke my favorite vase."

Pavlov stared at her hands.

"And then these two come in. And they want my help. Except they don't really, do they. Because if they did, they'd tell me something. But they *don't* ."

Pavlov's jaw began to quiver.

"He and his wife are like this… this *force* . I can't break through. But I need to break through. And so now I'm Cysaphus only I don't *want* to be, because there has to be a more effective way of getting the rock up the hill."

Pavlov began to whine.

She sighed, stabbing the spoon into the peanut butter a few times.

"The goal," she explained to her dog, "has to be to meet the son. That's- that's obvious, right? I mean. I *have* to meet this son. But these two- they need to help themselves. All three of them *need* to acknowledge what's going on, and if they don't open up- if I don't meet with all of them, and if the adults don't come to grips with their own issues then-" She leaned her head back and let out a groan.

At her feet, Pavlov leaned his own head down to rest against her left foot.

She let out another sigh, deflating, and tilted her head down to face her begging dog.

“You know what happened today? You know why I’m so *upset* .” She stuck the spoon into her mouth, sucking the peanut butter off. “She came in alone because he was late. And I was… I was *so close* to cracking her. Because she has so, so much empathy, that she’s just *ready* to burst. And I’m not saying he *doesn’t* , but he’s got this whole Men in Black routine down. So he and his wife become this force against nature when they’re together. I could have had it all. I bet- I bet alone, I could have convinced her to get her Son into the room, and I bet I could have helped each one of them out, and I bet-”

The thought struck her. Hands coated in peanut butter. Dog drooling on her left foot.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh. Holy shit.”

She threw the Kong down. Pavlov gave an excited YEEE and went scampering after it in a mess of uncoordinated limbs.

The idea didn’t so much as pop into her head as it did explode. And it continued to explode as she ran to her bag that she’d plopped down onto the kitchen table, ripping her notebook out, smearing peanut butter onto the paper.

The Wachowski’s were the third page.

When dealing with instances of trauma and stress in the home, couples will more than likely find solace in once another. It’s the best test of a marriage. And Dr. Burdett had seen both.

Some couples, beneath the pressure, crackled like wet cardboard.

And others turned their relationship into something stronger. In the absence of consistency, they become one anothers rocks until they turn into an impenetrable wall.

Tom and Maddie were the wall.

Together, they made up for the cracks in the household.

If one stayed silent, they both stayed silent.

If one of them hid, they both hid.

And if one of them (a tall man with short hair and a stubborn scowl) decided that they needed to lock their secrets away, then he was more than happy to hide his key while the other (empathetic, kind, worried) locked herself up tight.

But alone…

Alone …

On her couch today had been half of a wall.

And that left openings.

Oh , Dr. Burdett praised, staring down at her notes, smeared with ink and peanut butter. *Alice, you absolute genius, you* .

That was the anomaly.

The Wachowski's weren't *just* a wall.

They were a door and a key.

And a door without its key…

Alice found a pen in her bag and ripped off the cap with her teeth. Holding back an ecstatic shout, she wrote down the two words that would become her window;

SEPARATE THEM.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to the incomparable Invader_Sam who edited this for me. It wouldn't be where it is now without her.

Step 3: Reflection

Chapter Summary

People are like kettles. Eventually secrets will begin to overflow.

Chapter Notes

It's been FAR TOO LONG since I've updated this story, but I was beyond excited to finally get back and dig my little claws in!

To everyone who commented and read and waited - y'all are the best, and I couldn't do it without your amazing support.

Extra shoutout to my good friend Invader_Sam who helped me enormously throughout writing this chapter. She helped craft so many great ideas for the next few chapters as well, and I've been a busy bee planning the rest of this story.

Until then, enjoy

The first thing Alice did when she walked into the office Saturday morning was put a scone down on the table outside her room.

It was what she'd begun doing every time she came in, actually; dropping some sort of offering outside her office door on the little table, right beside the magazines touting hopelessly false promises like *New You in Ten Days* and *Lose Weight Without Exercise* and *How to Attract Mr. Right (Makeover Not Included)* . She usually made breakfast at home. An egg sandwich or an energy bar that tasted like if Boring was a flavor. When she didn't have time for that, she grabbed anything she could find from the bakery down the street.

Whatever she got, she always packed two, now.

Always .

There'd been no time to make her own breakfast that day, though. Which meant that she got to pay her bakery a visit.

She was the first one there, as she usually tended to be, saying hello to the sleepy eyed young adults who worked for summer trips or college tuition.

Which was great. Because they didn't question why she asked them to pack up a second in a bag.

Or why she asked them to write"Ghost" on the front.

"Okay," said a young man with braces named **Brian** . "How do they spell that?"

"G-H-O-S-T."

"Gnarly name."

"Absolutely," she said back. "Totally gnarly."

She paid a ridiculous amount, tipped two dollars, and took her bags.

Her own cranberry scone was half done by the time she'd walked into the office. The receptionist wasn't in yet, and she could hear Burt blasting *Dancing Queen* from three floors up.

She dropped the scone onto the table, turning around to the empty office.

"Alright," she said, "listen up, ghost."

No one answered.

"Everything's been great so far, and we're going to keep it that way, yeah?"

No one answered.

"I've got some really important, top grade clients today. Super mysterious types. Which means you're not allowed to open doors or rattle chains or whatever."

Still; no one answered.

Which she took as a good sign.

After all of the insanity of the video and the conversation with Burt over a broken coffee machine, Dr. Burdett had gone home shaken and taken to obsessively researching Warding Off Spirits on Google, which hadn't been a great idea. Because she'd had to sleep with the lights on for a week.

She'd waded through a slush of information about ouija boards and crystals and essential oils and complicated rituals that she didn't have the time and energy to perform (not that she didn't try - the chicken feet had smelled horrible though and Burt had thrown them out with a dirty look when he found them hanging above her door).

And then she'd found an article that had mentioned Sacrifices.

Most of the suggestions for sacrifices were little things, like a cow's heart from the butcher, snips of hair, or an object of great personal value.

Dr. Alice Burdett had decided that maybe the ghost would settle for a more reasonable sacrifice.

Like a power bar.

Or a scone.

Granted, none of her *sacrifices* had been taken (yet), but no demons had painted words on the walls with blood, so she figured it was the thought that counted.

She nodded her head at the still empty office. “Great,” she said. “Glad we have an understanding. And if you need to talk about unfinished business or whatever, my office is right here.” She pointed. “But don’t be an asshole about it, okay? No jump scares. No ghost pottery. No blood on the walls. Got it?”

After the empty office still didn’t respond, she nodded and headed into her office, closing the door behind her.

The scone would go untouched, even as the first patients began to filter through.

Dr. Alice Burdette knew that the next session would be a challenge.

Every moment with a patient had its ups and downs. She’d rode through her fair share of them, marking each down on the pages of her ever-present notebook.

But there was something incredibly personal about the case of Madeline and Thomas Wachowski that kept her up late at night, waiting for the day they’d come into her office. And when they finally did, just after 8 am on a Saturday morning, she was ready, plan sitting in the back of her head like a taut spring.

Separate them

Separate them

Separate them

Which was almost laughably ironic when they sat down on the couch and Tom immediately grabbed Maddie’s hand.

Dr. Burdette sat back on her seat, hooking one leg over the other. “Good morning,” she said, smiling too wide, putting extra emphasis on the pleasantries.

Mostly because they made Tom roll his eyes, and counting every scoff out of the man had become Alice’s new passion in life.

She put a little tick on the bottom of her page. One in one minute. Surprisingly not a personal best.

“I wanted to begin today by talking about how you’ve been handling the exercises at home. I know we’ve been working on perfection lately.”

Maddie nodded, sitting forward. “We’ve been trying to do more. School’s been keeping him mostly busy, and he’s been avoiding the kitchen lately, especially since it's getting nicer outside.”

“He likes the outdoors?”

“Loves it,” Maddie said, nodding. She seemed glad to be able to talk about something other than trauma. It was nice, Alice though. Seeing her light up over something. “You can’t take the kid from the outdoors. Which is great because we’re both outdoorsy.”

“A lot of hikes,” Tom agreed. “A lot of runs in the morning, too.”

“He’s happinest when he’s outdoors. Really. So we’re trying to keep him out there as much as we can.”

Alice nodded slowly. “Because there are less triggers out there?”

Maddie swallowed. “Maybe. I know it’s probably not the best thing. It’s just… everything still feels *uncertain* . And I do want him to at least have *some* good memories, you know?”

“I do,” Alice agreed.

Tom rolled his eyes.

Her attention shifted to him. “You disagree, Thomas?”

“Tom.”

Her brow rose. Maddie watched her husband.

Alice could tell that Tom was trying his best to keep up the facade of *I-Don’t-Give-a-Damn-What-You-Say* , but she’d spent enough time with patients to know otherwise. As much as he’d like to think of himself as one of a kind, he was just like anyone else who stepped into a therapists office.

Terrified of spilling their soul for someone who may just put together the pieces.

Despite his peacocking and strutting and jaw flexing, Alice’s new mission was slowly becoming the man in front of her.

Tom squirmed under her sudden attention and scooped his favorite fidget from the table; a little green block with clicking buttons and wheels on each side.

“We take him outside because it’s good for the kid,” he said, shrugging as if there wasn’t a weight on his shoulders. As if there wasn’t something around him that radiated something dark and sour. “S’not because he’s happier there. He’s happy anyway.”

Alice nodded, watching him closely. “Do you think it might be because he’s being given some momentary relief?”

His jaw ticked. She made a note of the motion. “I think,” he hissed, “it’s because he’s *getting better-* ”

“Tom,” Maddie hissed.

His jaw ticked again. “Nothing’s uncertain about any of this. We did your exercises. Things were fine. Then they got better. And now they’re good.”

She tapped her pen on the side of her paper. “And there’s been no signs of downward change?”

“None,” he insisted. “Unless you’re looking at my bank account. You know you’re not on my insurance plan, right?”

She smiled, keeping her eyes on his. They watched one another with the same awful coolness, and Alice almost worried that her little calming waterfall in the back bookshelves would freeze over.

He was lashing out. Something she’d said had *hurt* him.

Or maybe it went deeper than that…

“Thomas,” she began.

“Tom.”

“I’m sure you have seen an upward cycle in your child’s behavior. It’s perfectly normal.” She turned her notebook around to face them, flipping to a blank page. “Adjustment periods never work on a straight line.” She began to draw an upward slope on her paper, stopping just at the peak. “When he first joined you, he might have started around here,” she said, making a dot on the bottom of the slope, at the beginning. “You probably saw an upward progression up to this point, right?” Again, she drew a dot at the top of the slope.

Tom stared at the paper. He rolled his eyes again.

Maddie’s foot jerked out to kick his.

“Yes,” she said, while her husband mocked a silent injury, glaring at his wife. “That’s exactly how it went.”

“Totally normal,” Alice affirmed. “The beginning is usually an exciting period, like any relationship. It’s the honeymoon. People usually equate that with romance, but it’s not exclusive. Any relationship -friendship, romantic, familial- can work by the same timelines. And this period of time…” she drew a little line beside the slope, “is usually charged with a lot of energy. Adrenaline. Happiness. Excitement. Curiosity. He has a new family. It’s all sunshine.

“But then…” From the dot at the top of the slope she began to slowly drag the shape down, “we find ourselves settling, and once we’re able to settle, the first problems come out. Anxiety, maybe. Just a few hiccups of it. He probably tried to hold back as much as he could, but you might have seen a slip or two-”

“The plates,” Maddie said softly. “Just… anything he broke.”

“Exactly. He’d try harder until he could find a groove again. Try to make things better and stay really good. Scarily obedient, even.” She dragged the line back into an upward slope.

“He never did anything wrong,” Maddie agreed. “It was like living with a robot.”

“I remember. And then there might have been a few good moments. A few really great moments that would make him comfortable again. And once he was comfortable enough, his anxieties would find their way to wriggle back through.”

Again, the slope descended.

Ascend.

Descend.

Ascend.

Descend.

“You’ve come into the office every Saturday, and I’ve listened to you mimic this trend,” said Alice. “First it was a plate. And then he was *fine* . And then it was burnt food. And then he was *fine* again. Then it was panic. And now,” she tapped one of the upward lines, “it seems like we’re back to another ascent.”

Maddie’s face was beginning to gray. Despite Tom’s nonchalance beside her, she still reached for his hand again.

There had been incidents. Small ones. Barely noticeable.

Only because he’d made sure it was that way.

Sparks off his quills when he put the dishes into the wrong cabinet. Soft self-reprimands, whispered under his breath, when he forgot to take out the trash.

Maddie, coming home from a run, had once found him trailing just behind her; a blur through the trees.

“Sonic? Honey?”

He’d looked bashful enough when he’d been caught, staring at the dirt under his sneakers, drawing a soft pattern in the dust.

“Sorry,” he’d said, when she’d kneeled to meet his eyes. “Sorry. I-” Sparks hissed, and he’d taken a deep breath to stifle them back. It had been like watching a chemical reaction contained in a jar, hissing its way up, leaving behind little chips and cracks. “M’ sorry.”

“Honey. It’s okay.” She waited until the sparks were gone to reach out and touch his face. He pulled away quickly, and looked even more guilty when he’d realized what he’d done.

“Sonic,” she began.

He’d shaken his head. “Just makin’ sure,” he said again, before he was gone in a blur.

She didn’t understand what he’d meant until she’d come back from her run an hour later, dripping in sweat, an old 80’s playlist blasting away through her earbuds. Sonic had been on the porch with a water bottle and a look that she could only classify, with a sort of horror, as relief.

I was just making sure, he’d said.

Standing in the shower, letting hot water scald her face, she’d wiped away tears with a loofah and understood that he hadn’t expected her to come back to him at all.

“God,” Maddie breathed. “So…” She scrubbed her face with her free hand, looking off towards one of the far walls in the therapist's office.

She was processing. Alice let her.

From the back of the room, her little waterfall (still unfrozen somehow) burbled quietly. One of the air purifiers spritzed. Her white noise machine hummed.

Maddie’s eyes were watering, and Alice quietly passed a box of tissues.

“It’s normal to be worried,” Alice said, after another minute passed. When Maddie didn’t reach for a tissue, Tom took one out and offered it to his wife, who took it gratefully, eyes still on the wall.

“I know…” Maddie’s voice was full of salt. She wiped at her eyes, balling the tissue up in her hand. Tom grabbed a second one, just in case she needed it. “I just… I keep hoping that *this is it* , you know? That we cracked some code.”

Alice’s smile was sympathetic.

“And then,” Maddie continued, wiping her eyes again. A missed tear rolled down her face and hung off her chin. “And then… knowing that it’ll all go down again? It’s just…”

“You feel helpless,” Alice supplied.

Maddie nodded.

“That’s fine. That’s good. I know it might not seem good, but it is. Helplessness is a form of acceptance, whether we know it or not. It’s reality catching up. And oftentimes, as much as my patients refuse to believe it, reality can be managed. As bad as it seems, it can always be managed.”

“We’re managing fine,” Tom said, defenses back up. “We’re doing *great* , actually.”

Maddie elbowed him.

Dr. Burdett watched him carefully. He was getting defensive again.

Excellent.

She could deal with defensive.

Defensive meant afraid. Defensive meant she was breaking through his stupid, chiseled layers.

Tom had a pattern. Just like his son.

He worried.

He loved.

He hoped.

And then, the moment someone questioned his abilities as a parent, the shields were up. And to Alice, who watched and waiting and cared so abnormally much about the pair of adults who were practically built of nothing more than red flags and love for their mystery of a son, that meant that he was hurting.

Almost as much as his son was.

(As much as Alice disliked the attitude sitting behind what was no doubt an obnoxious set of abs, she was intent on watching him as closely as she could without drawing too much attention. Behind the sharp jaw, the sharp eyes, the sharp, knifepoint edge to his voice, Thomas Wachowski was soft and small underneath, crying for help too quietly to hear.

And Alice was getting better at listening)

“That’s great, Thomas. It’s great that you think things are fine. But wouldn’t you rather they were more than fine?”

Something behind Thomas’ eyes softened painfully, and Alice held her breath.

“That’s all we want for him,” Maddie stepped before her husband could speak, and Alice had the sudden urge to throw her pen across the room, right into her serenity fountain. She held it tighter in her fist instead. “We just want him to be okay.”

“Good.” Dr. Burdett clicked her pen twice and then set it to the paper. “So let’s come up with some tactics for the week. Have you ever thought about tracking?”

She set them up with a simple plan.

More activities they could try for immersion and panic; painting and a few easy, meditative outdoor games (Tom had scoffed at the word *meditative* , and she made a note that nowhere in meditation did it forgo throwing pens at smug bastards, which sounded like an incredibly soothing way to center herself). Maddie wrote them down in her own little notebook, nodding the entire time.

She also offered them homework.

Another word Tom had scoffed over.

“I’d like you to start tracking his panic attacks. When he has one, make a note in a private place. A notebook.Your phone. Wherever. Mark the date and the time exactly. And, if you can, whatever triggered it.”

“Okay,” said Maddie.

“It’ll be good to start seeing if there’s anything specific that’s causing his spirals, especially seeing as I can’t talk to him myself. Unless you’re willing-”

“We’re not,” Tom said, throwing his arm over the back of the chair like he was the Emperor of Rome. “Not happening.”

“Okay,” she said. “So then track, if you can. It’ll also be good to see how far apart the attacks are, just to get some idea of frequency.”

Maddie wrote herself another note. “We can do that,” she said a moment later, snapping the book shut. “Absolutely.”

Alice nodded.

Tom patted the back of the chair, loud enough to make his wife jump. “Right,” he said. “That’s it, right? We can go home?”

He began to stand, until; “Actually, Mr. Wachowski.”

He paused, hovering over the cushion.

“There’s something I’d like to talk to you about first. Both of you.”

He dropped to the couch again with an annoyed *umph* .

There was a moment of silence, filled only by the noise machine and the little waterfall.

“So,” she began. “I want to talk to you both about how we should be continuing these sessions.”

Maddie sat up a little. Tom crossed his arms and eyed the fidgets.

“I’d like to try something new.”

“Finally resorting to shock therapy, huh?” Tom said, flashing her a fiery grin. “Knew it was only a matter of time.”

“Actually, Mr. Wachowski, I was thinking more about individual sessions. I’d like to speak with each of you. Alone.”

She didn't expect the reaction to be a good one, and so it wasn't much of a surprise when Tom burst.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Mr. Wachowski-”

“You’re *kidding* me!”

His voice was rising above the little waterfall and white noise machine.

Maddie grabbed his shoulder. “ *Tom* . She's just suggesting something that might help-"

He ignored her, rolling his shoulder out of her grasp. “Meeting with us alone?”

“Mr. Wachowski. If you could just-”

“I need you to help my *son* ,” he snapped. “Not try and play shrink with *me* .”

She sat forward in her seat, trying to keep her voice low. “That’s not how this works.”

“Then tell me how it works, *Doctor* .”

“Relationships in a household are complicated. It isn’t as simple as a one-way street. He’s not an independent entity. Whatever he’s going through… oftentimes the struggles children face are fueled by the parents' insecurities. And on the flip side of that, the struggles of the child can put a lot of strain on the adults.”

“We’re *fine* ,” Tom said, shoulders rolled back.

“You’re saying that,” said Dr. Burdette, “because you’re not seeing it from the outside.”

“I’m saying it because I *know my kid* . He’s tough, okay? Way tougher than you give him credit for. He’s faced down an army. Looked missiles right in the face and-”

“ *Tom* ,” Maddie was suddenly frantic, grabbing his arm. “Tom, listen to me-”

But he couldn't. Not when he was like this. Leaning forward in his seat like he wanted to leap up and run. "No one *gets it* . None of you government people *get it* . The only reason he's still with us right now is because he's with us. Not with the military. Not in some lab. Because we kept people like you from sniffing around and trying to prove that he's some broken *thing* and I *won't lose-* "

"Thomas! *Stop!* "

Tom's fury was cut short by his wife's hand gripping his. And his sudden realization that he'd said something he wasn't meant to.

His face went as red as the flags and alarms that were blaring in Alice's head. Her throat felt dry, and it took all of her effort not to fall backwards in her chair.

From beside him, Maddie choked and looked up to meet Alice's eyes.

She knew. They both knew.

Tom had slipped.

Then again, it was only a little slip that brought down Rome, and she'd finally found at least a splinter from the wooden horse.

Tom stood quickly, accidentally dragging a shellshocked Maddie (hand still on his knee) with him. He didn't meet Alice's eyes, panic fixed on the back wall. "We're fine," he croaked, as if the declaration could erase his mistake. "And you know what else?"

Alice tried to find her own voice. "Mr. Wachowski-"

"We're done."

"Tom!" Maddie twisted to face him, but Tom was already picking up his coat. "We don't need someone picking through what they *shouldn't* be picking through. We've got enough people trying to-"

He cut himself off before he could slip again.

Dr. Burdette's red light was spinning. Furiously, erratically spinning. Through the pulses and her own stupor, she at least managed to stand up and reach for him. "Mr. Wachowski. If you could just sit down-"

"We just need to be left alone."

" *Mr. Wachowski-* "

"Just leave us *alone* ."

He was gone before Dr. Burdette could say another word, door slamming behind him.

Maddie stayed behind, looking at the spot where her husband had been. There was silence between the two women as the mother tried her best to regain her breath. Between the noise machines and the gentle hum of the world outside the office, Alice could practically hear Maddie's heartbeat thrumming through her chest.

"Mrs. Wachowski?"

Maddie wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry about him."

"Don't be."

"No- no he shouldn't have…" She stopped herself, looking away. "What he said about our… he just- he didn't mean it like that. I mean- he just wasn't supposed to…"

It was a lie. Alice knew, and she had a suspicion that Maddie was all too aware how thin it was. Despite all of the alarms, Alice knew how patients worked, and as much as she wanted to address the red lights and flags that were having a circus in her head, she knew that prying wouldn't do them any favors. And from what the parents had told her so far, it didn't seem as if their son was in any bodily harm.

Not like social services wouldn't have a good laugh if she explained that two parents told her that the army had set their sights on a pre-teen. If the insanity that had come from her patients mouth was to be believed.

Honestly, with the way the last week had gone… she could honestly say she'd heard stranger.

Instead, Alice pointed towards the couch. Maddie sat again. "Your husband is in a fragile place. You both are."

She nodded. "I just… I don't know what to do. And I'm worried…" She swallowed, taking her time.

Alice let her have it.

Maddie took a tissue, fisting it between her hands. A soft sprinkling of papery dust floated from between her fingers. "They're both *teetering* . And if Tom really means what he said… if he won't come back-"

Alice thought a minute, tapping her pen against her paper. "Do you have a kettle? The stove kind?"

The question took the mother by surprise. "Oh, uh." Maddie's brows twitched downward. "Yeah. I've got a blue one. Tom's mother got it for us when we moved into our house."

"And you've made water in it?"

Another twitch of her brows. "Every night."

“The way that kettle’s work is that heat and pressure build inside. Water bubbles and gets hotter and hotter until finally,” she snapped, “it whistles.” She handed the mother another tissue, the first one completely shredded in her fist. “Kettles aren’t so different from people that way. And I have a feeling that Tom… that the *both* of them… are getting very close to whistling.”

The new mother drew in a quick breath at the sound of her son’s name. “Should I be worried?”

“You should be watching.”

Another sharp inhale.

“I’m not saying to lock the doors and windows or pad the walls. But be prepared. Your husband is pushing. And if our tracking is right,” she tapped the paper she’d used during their session to draw the graphs, “Your son is going to be on his way to another descent. And Tom won’t be ready for it.”

Maddie wiped her eyes. It was a small miracle that there was light in them again. “I’ll watch,” she promised. “Anything I can do. And if I see anything-?”

“You have my number.”

She nodded, standing, picking up her pocket book from beside her and walking towards the door.

Her hand paused on the knob. “Um.”

Alice watched her from across the room.

“About what Tom said…”

Alice held her breath.

“Don’t-” Maddie swallowed. “We’d appreciate it if you kept that secret.”

If Alice’s red light was any brighter, it would have shot out her eyes. Instead of letting out a scream of *what the actual hell are you guys doing* , she said, “everything here is confidential, Mrs. Wachowski. You won’t have to worry about that.”

Maddie nodded.

She fiddled with the doorknob, staring down at her hands. And then, as if finally deciding something, she twisted back towards the therapist.

“And… and my son?” Her voice was all courage when she finally looked the therapist in the eye. “His name is Sonic.”

And then left, closing the door softly behind her.

Alice sat in her chair for a few minutes after. She didn't have another client for an hour, and it gave her time to sit and wait.

Sonic.

That was their son's name.

Sonic .

It was an odd name. Something a kid might have given themselves in a Superhero game.

A slip.

That was all it had taken.

Tom had fallen under his worry and fear, and his wife was being crushed under the weight of secrets. They'd given her more than Alice thought they might have in their short time in her office.

Alice waited until the end of the day, after all of the clients had gone and left with appointments set in her book, to finally do something with the name she'd scribbled in her notebook.

Sharon, the receptionist, was just packing up her desk when Alice came out of her office and set a stack of manilla folders in front of the woman. "Something for you to do tomorrow," said the therapist.

Sharon smiled. "Goody." She scooped up the files and lay them neatly by the computer before picking up her cell phone and unplugging the charger. "Anything else, Dr. Burdette?"

"Actually…"

Sharon paused in her collections.

"Tomorrow… I'd like it if you could make some calls."

"Course. New patient sign ups?"

"Actually, I was thinking more to City Hall."

One of Sharon's perfectly sculpted brows rose. "Any reason?"

"I want you to look up a name for me in the public records."

"You want me to dig up information on a patient?"

"On their son, actually." She wrote down the name below a printout she'd made in her office with the Green Hills City Hall highlighted, and slid it across the table to Sharon. "Ask them about any adoption requests put through for him. And if they don't have that, then ask about anything else. School registration, birth certificates."

“Course, boss.” She took a look at the paper, squinting. Her long, false lashes fluttered when she blinked. “Is this the right name?”

“I know. It’s… odd.”

“Sonic Wachowski.” The receptionist laughed, folding the paper up and leaving it on the keyboard for morning. “It always amazes me what parents think is a good name for a kid.” Shaking her head, bidding the therapist goodnight, she lifted her bag and rounded the desk.

Alice packed up her own office quickly enough, shutting off the lights behind her. She bid farewell to the ghost on the way out, and didn’t play any music on the car ride home. The silence helped her think.

Sonic Wachowski.

Maddie had given her a name, most likely as some sort of leverage to keep the secret her husband had spilled. A strange, brief secret about missiles and armies. The way he’d looked at her and called her *one of you Government people* . In giving her answers, he'd only created more twisted questions.

“It was strange,” she told Pavlov, after he’d walked and had dinner. Her own sat in front of her. Untouched. She picked at a carrot before dropping it back down. Her stomach was in knots. “As insane as he sounded… it was like he was telling the truth…”

Or at least his version of it.

It wasn’t as if she was worried they wouldn’t be back. Like she’d told Maddie, Tom and Sonic were kettles sitting on their own stoves.

There was no if.

Only when.

Eventually they’d both whistle. And she was going to be ready when they did.

Alice stood and went to go find her laptop, ignoring the video of the blue blur still on her screen.

She had some detective work to do.

End Notes

many thanks to Invader_Sam for all of her wonderful help editing.

chapters will vary in length.

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